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(Ms.)EDUCATION IN THE BORDERLANDS OF ACADEMIA: GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY

CECILIA ELIZABETH SUAREZ

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy Studies
with a minor in Latina/Latino Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Ruth Nicole Brown, Chair
Professor Adrienne D. Dixson, Director of Research
Associate Professor Bernice M. Barnett
Associate Professor Richard T. Rodriguez

Abstract

Literature about Mexican American student achievement focuses mainly on issues regarding educational support and retention of Mexican American students in higher education. These scholarly works often highlight reasons why Latino students struggle to succeed, without discussing the overarching power structures of race and using Critical Race Theory as "an analytical tool for understanding school inequity" (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p.47). Moreover, most of this existing literature rarely, if so briefly, discusses the differentiation and distinctive emphasis between Mexican American men and women, particularly the unique familial, cultural, and societal expectations that impact the lived experiences of Mexican American women who are first generation college students. When gender differences are discussed, the blame is placed on cultural practices, family income, and language deficiencies. This study analyzes the current academic struggles of Mexican American women pursuing higher education degrees in the United States. Furthermore, this inquiry gives visibility to Mexican American women students and the cultural and societal expectations they experience. Finally, this research challenges the current notions that view the Mexican American woman's education struggle from a cultural deficit model and imposes a lens of Critical Race Theory that deconstructs normative practices in academia and society that inhibit the academic progress of Mexican American women first generation college students.

In memory of:

My grandmother,
Ignacia "Nacha" Suarez

I know you're proud of the trouble I've been causing down here.

Dedicated to:

My mother & SHEro
Elizabeth S. Suarez

You sacrificed so that I would never be left wanting.
All that I have accomplished is for you.

My ancestors,

Your spirits guide me and your blood runs through me.
I am your proclamation that you are still present.
Use me as a vessel to keep our stories alive.

My participants,

You are powerful beyond measure. Thank you for trusting me with your words. Remember to speak loudly, walk hard, and live life unapologetically. You inspire me to continue to do this work that matters.

UBUNTU - *"I am because we are."*

I can think of no better word to capture my gratitude for everyone who loved me, believed in me, and pushed me to be the best person I could possibly be than "Ubuntu." I am Dr. Cecilia Elizabeth Suarez because of the sacrifices, pride, and strength of my community. This degree initially was never for me. Although now I understand that this degree also includes me, it will always remain an achievement for my communities. To list all of my communities would be a setup for failure because I would inevitably leave someone out, but just know that if you've ever shown me love, believed in me, or fought for equal human rights for everyone, YOU are my community.

Of course, there are certain spirits, people, and communities I must mention because their love and support undeniably continues to shape who I am and their strength taught me how to be the warrior I am today:

*To my Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown (Advisor)
Dr. Adrienne D. Dixson (Director of Research)
Dr. Bernice Barnett
Dr. Richard T. Rodriguez

This degree is a dream come true that could not have been accomplished without you! I am honored to be your student and work with you. Your guidance and expertise of the field and process assisted me in completing the necessary work to earn this degree. However, your words of wisdom, compassion, and push to do and be more are the ultimate blessings. I hope that my work can follow in your footsteps of being catalysts for justice, equality, and strength.

*To mommy, Elizabeth "La Liz" Suarez, thank you for loving me beyond measure and protecting me from the world until it was time for me to learn about the world on my own. You constantly sacrificed so that I could have. You are my strength, my drive, and why I constantly strive to be a better person. We are so much alike now, in mannerisms and in heart. I am honored to be your daughter. "I love you THIS much!"

*To grandma, Ignacia "Nacha" Suarez, you know my heart and I know you watch over me daily. Thank you for being my partner in crime and letting me lick the cake batter spoon (my mom never let me do that). You prayed for me more than you prayed for yourself. Your hugs were "home" and your belief that there is good in everyone reminds me to order my steps and interactions with love and understanding.

*To La Familia Suarez, thank you for being warriors of life and for the lessons passed down from generation to generation. The name Suarez will forever be mine and although I have not met every family member, I know that strength to survive and thrive runs through our blood.

*To Dad and La Familia Guerra, thank you for the positive thoughts, prayers, and love you sent my way. Although I only know a small portion of my Guerra family, I am proud to carry the

name and am grateful for the love that I grew up knowing from my father and his family. Dad, you always knew how to make me smile. Thank you for my thick wavy hair, my tan skin, and my killer dance moves and for the time you spent with me before you went to the great big dance hall in the sky.

*To La Familia Flores, thank you for sharing family experiences with my mother and I. Through the hard times and happy times, we seemed to always get through them together. Thank you for caring for my mother when I was away. I appreciate you all.

*To Kathy and Clyde McIntyre, thank you for being my second set of parents. While I am eternally grateful for your love, support, and prayers, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the love and care you've shown my mom. It is because of you that I learned that family can also be chosen and regardless of last name, family is love.

*To "Momma D" (Dr. Adrienne D. Dixson), thank you for claiming me as one of your own, loving me like your own, lecturing me like one of your own, and pushing me like one of your own. Not only do our physical features resemble a mother/daughter duo, but our personalities and attitudes are one in the same. I thank God for your presence in my life and your guidance. I am honored to be your first student, under your direction, to earn a PhD. I will forever work to make you proud and strive to keep the fight, passion, and foundation of educational justice you have instilled in me alive and thriving!

*To "Aunt" Sr. Rosemary, thank you for bringing out my love of teaching from a very young age. Thank you for watching me while my mom was at work, making me cream cheese sandwiches, helping me grow spiritually, and constantly praying for my family. You have helped me achieve my PhD in more way than you know. Thank you for being my Tia.

*To St. Cecilia's School and Parish, I was a part of your community even before I was born. From baptism, to K-8, to Quinceañera, to my grandma's homecoming, you have always been there. The lessons learned at school and Church are too many to count, but have helped shape who I am today. Undeniably, you contributed to the groundwork for my spiritual life and my moral outlook. To my grandmother's and mom's friends who showed me a little extra love via food, money, or reprimands for talking in Church, thank you.

*To Lambda Theta Alpha, Latin Sorority Incorporated, Beta Sigma Chapter (University of Miami, FL), SKY'S THE LIMIT! The love and loyalty shared and shown between my sisters is like no other. The older I grow, the more and more I understand just how amazing it is to be a part of this sisterhood. To my mom and PM, Jennifer "Jelly" (Benitez) Alcaraz and Founding Line (Lucia/"Spicy", Angie, Andrea, Rose, Carmen, & Claudia/ "Clauds"), I am forever grateful to you for helping make me into a quality sister. I will forever remain loyal to the roots and traditions you instilled in me. Your strength has helped me push to achieve my goals. Thank you for your tough love and your constant support and for always believing that this little Angelita could be Dr. Suarez! To my Line Sisters, Line 1, Spring 2001 (Chris, Jasi, Blanche, Karen, Christina, & Morgana), you ladies are my heart! It is amazing to experience us growing and building our own families and no matter how near or far we are from each other, it's all love! I look forward to 75 more years of vacations, weddings, births, celebrations, and life with you. I

am so proud to be your tail and line sister! To my sisters across the country, THANK YOU for continuing to keep LTA in your hearts. Even though some of us may have never met, I am proud of you and will continue to fight the good fight for you! Special shout out to Janett C. Ramos from Nu Chapter. We met 13 years ago and then happened to end up in Illinois together…life planned this long ago. Thank you for your strength and reminder that taking time for the self is imperative. Your spirit soothes and nourishes. Thank you for helping me be the best CC I can be.

*To my Jasi, my line sister # 2, confidant and ROCK. Since we first met, we've always shared a unique understanding of each other and the fact that we are fiery Virgos helps! Thank you for being my confidant and sharing tears, laughs, and crazy nights with me. The one thing that we share is our connection to our grandmothers. Your grandmother was an amazing woman who sacrificed so that others could have something to eat and a place to sleep. Her passion for life is in you and she will be with you always. Never forget that. I know our grandmas are watching over us together and having a party with lots of food, music blaring, and looking fierce,

*To my soror, family, and friend, Berenice Sanchez, thank you for being my ROCK! I am so thankful that our paths crossed and brought us to Illinois. I don't know what I would have done without you this last year of my PhD program. You are an amazing woman, a force to be reckoned with and I am so honored to call you family. TRUST, I'm here for you and will stand beside you for whatever you need. Here's to years and years of SVU, ice cream, and sisterhood. Looking forward to being a viejita with you!

*To my best friend, family, and ROCK, Marcus Brent Richardson Felder. Life wouldn't be life without you! Your loyalty and love mean the world to me. Thank you for always being there for me, regardless of the situation, for letting me live my life to the fullest, being loud with me and singing/modulating in the streets of NYC, and reminding me that I can do *anything* because you will always be there for me. I am proud to be your "bestie" and look forward to the years to come. Never underestimate yourself. You are brilliant!

*To Love, I love you back. Clyde T. Edmonds, thank you for loving my perfections, imperfections, and growing with me. I am so grateful that you asked me to dance…and that I finally said yes. Thank you for the tough love and stern "pep talks" that never allowed me the chance to feel self-pity, but reminded me that I started something and that I CAN (& did) finish it. I got your back always. I guess Wacka Flacka & Neo Soul do go together ;).

*To my NYC Family…you know who you are! Thank you for welcoming me back to my 2nd home every few months with open arms, quality time, and lots of shenanigans. You make life so much sweeter! I love New York City, but I love it because of you all! Let's make sure to keep in touch wherever the wind takes us!

*To my big sis Dr. Chamara J. Kwakye, your strength and self-love inspires me to be a higher me! Thank you for loving me like a sister and sharing the "only child" bond. Your words of understanding and support through joys and pains have helped me remain ME. I love you sis.

*To "The Village", there are absolutely no words to encompass the amount of moments we've shared together. We are family. We have ebbed and flowed with life and through it all, we

remain “The Village”. We were selective and protective of our village for a reason. I am honored to have been welcomed with open arms to this family. UBUNTU! Here’s to endless years of celebrations, collaborations, and blessings! Y’all know who y’all are!!!

*To my mentee, Christopher Cole (Lil C), I am so proud of you! YOU motivate me with your activist spirit and passion for life. I’m glad to be standing next to you as we join in the fight for academic equity for all children. Mad love!

*To my family of scholars who will soon graduate, YOU GOT THIS! If there is anything you need, know that Big C’s got you. I look forward to future collaborations and disturbing the “peace”.

*To Jerry Cole, your support and compassion have been true blessings. Thank you for always knowing when I needed a phone call, text, hug, visit, “pillow cookies”, or pair of Air Maxs! Here’s to many more years of friendship.

*To my Miami family, GO CANES! It’s great to be a Miami Hurricane!

*To my students, past, present, and future, thank you for allowing me to engage with you in our community classrooms. I hope you know that I genuinely care for you all and wish you the best of luck in your endeavors. Remember to question what you were taught and accept it only if it truly makes sense in your heart.

I was supposed to keep this acknowledgement section simple…that clearly didn’t happen. After four pages of gratitude, I realize I have 100 more pages to go. If I happened to not mention you personally or you feel left out, please don’t be “salty”. Charge it to my head and not my heart. While I cannot possibly thank each and every person that assisted me along the way, I know that this achievement would not have been possible without the blood, sweat, and tears of a community, my community. If you ever need me, just say the word, and I’ll be there. Community is family and family is everything to me. I will always carry a song in my heart for you.

Ashe. Amen.

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Prologue

Who I'm From: The Personal Lives in this Research

True to its purpose of providing space for unheard and devalued stories and demanding justice for Mexican American women's unwritten yet powerful stories of struggle and resistance, I find it fitting to introduce my work by first introducing the two women whose stories serve as the foundation of my strength, history, and my initial motivation to unearth these stories. Although their stories inspire me, my grandmother and mother were often seen as irrelevant by a dominant hetero-normative society that circumscribed the role of quiet servant for Mexican women. I share the following stories not only to honor my heroines, but also as a proclamation of the importance and need for counter narratives in order to better support and include Mexican American women in higher education and American society writ large.

"Praise the Lord, Amen!": Memories of Grandma

"You know what? You and I have the same enemy -- your mother." My grandmother was not known for her sense of humor by others, but she had a way of making sly comments that could make anyone chuckle. Standing five feet tall with a salt and pepper afro, my grandmother was not small. In fact, I lovingly gave her the nickname, "Trouble" and she in turn called me "Double Trouble." Also, answering to "lil bambino," I was the last grandchild born (before the great grandchildren) and therefore the youngest, and most spoiled. Now, three years after her passing, at age 31, I still need her to survive.

I often took for granted my time with grandma because I saw her everyday after school and spent the evenings with her. However, there are some things that I will always carry with me. My math homework always proved challenging to me as a child, but my grandmother created new ways of learning math by using things around the house. For example, my

grandmother taught me how to play dominoes in grade school so that I could learn how to multiply. If I did not calculate my score fast enough, I lost my points and my grandmother got to "swipe" them from me. As a result, I became the fastest person in my class to be able to multiply! Only having a fourth grade education, my grandmother surprisingly tutored me in math through high school. Retiring as a nurse in her early 60s, Ignacia was never one to sit around the house. Even as a nurse, she was active in many church activities and councils, baked and sold homemade cakes, and volunteered as a teacher at the local jail. Lovingly known as "Nacha" to her neighborhood, she was a faithful Catholic woman (she would have wanted me to tell you that she was Catholic) who sacrificed her life to make others feel wanted and welcomed.

Although physically not present, her words, her lessons, and her spirit are embedded in the very fibers of my being. Remembering through stories and memories has a double meaning for me when it comes to my grandmother. Developing Alzheimer's Disease, my grandmother went from not being able to remember certain things, to not remembering me or anyone she loved. Alzheimer's Disease is hard for the patient and equally hard on the family. Towards the end of her life, I was blessed with one small moment of coherent clarity with my grandmother. After feeding my grandmother chicken wings and a strawberry milk shake, literally the only thing she would agree to eat towards the end, I sat with her at the kitchen table. I was home visiting from New York (where I worked at the time) because my mother was in the hospital, and had the opportunity to spend time with grandma. All of a sudden, my grandmother looked at me, grabbed my hand, and told me that she was proud of me. She asked how I was doing, told me that I was beautiful and that I looked just like my mother. Asking about my "baby," I thought I had lost her few seconds of mental clarity to the disease, because I do not have any children. However, she continued and was actually reminiscing about how she took care of my dog (my

"baby") when he was just a puppy. I told my grandma that I loved her and she told me she loved me. Although it lasted only a few minutes, I will remember this always and am grateful for this interaction with my grandma. That visit to Texas was the last time I would see my grandmother alive.

Sitting in the front pew at the funeral home during the Rosary/Wake portion of my grandmother's funeral services proved harder than anticipated. It was difficult for me to maintain my emotional composure. Serving as my mother's rock and sitting by her side, my grandmother's friend who was also her supervisor at the jail ministry where she volunteered asked if he could say a few words about "Nacha." Stepping to the podium, he surprisingly pulled out a stapled bunch of papers and said that he was going to read something from my grandmother's final report that she turned in while serving as a minister at the jail. She wrote:

> *My daily life is more at peace, because I no longer am worrying if Jesus is happy with how I apply myself as a jail minister. Because now I am sure that He is present and directing me in what to do and what not to do. There has been a lot of times that the pain on my feet is really great, but I asked the Lord to help me so that I can continue with my ministry; I found out that there are two ways of suffering, to suffer with love and to suffer without love…I am not a saint, but I too love Jesus and when my feet are killing me, I just thank Jesus for my pain and continue to carry my cross. I must remember that man being created by love, cannot live without love…Oh my God, I hope that thou will reward me for all that I have done to please thee. Praise the Lord, Amen!*

Hearing about my grandmother's undying commitment to the jail ministry, even through her pain, struck every emotional fiber in my being. She was so strong…physically, mentally, emotionally. Yes, I admit my bias of thinking that she is one of the most remarkable women ever

because she is my grandma, but that does not negate her seemingly superhuman care and commitment to wanting to better the lives of others…my life. Where was her chance to share her story? Why is her story and the story of so many other strong grandparents and ancestors not written in the history books used to teach our youth about "American" history?

"Love you Mija": A Mother's Love is the Strongest Motivation

People often ask me how a girl from Texas got all the way to Illinois and how my life led me to earn a PhD. Without hesitation, I mention my mother, who gave me her blessing and let me "go live" my life. As an only child, it was always just my mom and I. Of course my grandmother completed the Suarez women trinity, I was my mom's shadow whenever her work schedule allowed. When I decided to attend The University of Miami for my undergraduate education, external family and church community members could not believe that my mother was letting me move so far away from home. My mother later revealed to me that she initially did not want to let me go to Miami, but did not want me to resent her and always wonder "what if...what would my life have been like had I attended Miami."

It is hard for me not to shed tears when thinking of the about strain, stress, pain, and hard work my mother has experienced in her life--for me. Ever since I can recall my first vivid memories, I remember my mother working two jobs. Working an "eight to five" full-time job and then clocking in at her "six to ten" night job, my mother had little time for herself. Her choice to work two jobs was not really a choice but the only option she had to give me the life she wanted me to have. In a recent daily phone conversation with my mother, she told me that while cleaning out an old bookcase, she found a picture I drew as a child. She said it made her cry because it was a picture of the two of us but we were far away on the page and I drew my mom at her job. I wrote the words "sad," "I miss my mommy," and "that's just how I feel

sometimes" on the page. As a child, I may not have understood my mother's absence, I realize that I have accomplished so much because of my mother's sacrifices. Although the picture I drew may indicate otherwise, my mother had a very active presence in my schooling. I am still amazed at how involved she remained in my many activities and academics, despite having two jobs. She pushed me to excel in everything I did and always told me that I was going to college, even before I understood the concept of college.

Growing up in a house with approximately 15 other family members, my mother knew and still knows how to survive. She has told me stories of how she was lucky to get a pair of shoes or a shirt for Christmas and that meals often consisted of meager ingredients, but her and her siblings and cousins did not know the difference. All that mattered was that they were fed. As the only girl and middle child of my grandmother and grandfather, my mother was charged with "household duties" while her brothers were allowed to have lives outside of the house. To this day, my mother tells me stories of how she would have to clean and cook for her brothers, only to have them dirty the house before they left. As a result, she will protest doing the dishes or cleaning IF anyone tells her to do it. My mom shared with me that the reason I did not have a strict chore regimen was because she hated being told to clean the house as the only girl. My mom showed me how to clean and instilled the value of a clean house without demanding that household chores were a "woman's duty".

Sewing factory worker turned community worker, marathon runner, lover of San Francisco, and socialite, my mother's life was anything but boring before my birth. Her pregnancy and my birth did not slow her down. I suppose slowing down was not an option because my mom had to now support a baby. After two weeks of maternity leave, my mother returned back to work, and since September 4, 1982, she has not stopped hustling to make sure I

could live the life I wanted.

More of my mother's story will be shared throughout this dissertation, via my personal counter narrative, but this short introduction of my mother provides insight into how and why I am passionate about "re-humanizing" the lives of Mexican American women and their lived struggles. Too often, child rearing and family care giving is not seen as labor. Rather it is an expectation placed on Mexican American women and is given no worth or value. During daily phone conversations with my mother, I hear, "I love you Mija" (daughter), and instantly my determination to continue writing, researching, and fighting is fueled. I am a mirror image of my mother. Our speaking voices are even hard for family members to tell apart. My "mommy's" love encourages me. She is known by her friends from work and in the community for her compassionate sensitive, and selfless care and consideration of others. She is passionate but not known for using forceful words. Therefore, I serve as her proclamation that a Mexican American woman's life is valid, is equal, is a struggle, and is love. My mother always says that she lives through me, but I live because of her.

Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

The United States has long grappled with the academic success of Latina/o students for decades, to no avail. High school dropout rates and the completion of higher education degrees has been the focus of much research regarding Latina/o students. In particular, as the largest growing Latino population, Mexican American students have been at the forefront of such scholarly research. Although highly researched, current literature lacks focus specifically on Mexican American women college students and the unique differences between their experiences and Mexican American men college students. Coupled with the identity of being a first generation college student, Mexican American women in higher education cannot find themselves in literature because their unique experience and intersecting identities are not explored, supported, or heard. As a result of not knowing the experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students, ways in which to best support the academic success of this population is assumed to be the same as that of the white student at Predominantly White Institutions.

Purpose of Study

Literature about Mexican American student achievement focuses mainly on issues regarding educational support and retention of these students in higher education. These scholarly works often highlight reasons (financial aid, underprepared academically) why Latino students struggle to succeed, without discussing the overarching power structures of race and using Critical Race Theory as "an analytical tool for understanding school inequity" (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p.47). Moreover, most of this existing literature rarely, if only briefly, discusses the differences between Mexican American men and women, particularly the unique familial,

cultural, and societal expectations that impact the lived experiences of Mexican American women who are first generation college students. When gender differences are discussed, the blame is placed on cultural practices, family income, and language deficiencies. Mexican American women's voices are generally ignored by the media and education system and their stories are not seen as knowledgeable.

In the space of the academy, Mexican American women students are viewed as women, absent of an ethnic or racial identity; Mexican American, absent of a gendered identity; *or* students, absent of either a gender or racial/ethnic identity. The intersection of these three identities, along with various other identities is generally ignored while on campuses by administrators, faculty, and other peers. These women are often in situations where they feel they must walk on campus as one identity or choose which identity must be muted or lowered in spaces such as classrooms. Separating and silencing identities in this way forces these women to feel as if they must deny one identity over another to navigate through the academy and successfully obtain a degree. Dividing these intersecting identities assumes that these women experience the academy in the same way that white students, regardless of gender, or as Latino males move through the university. Stifling these women and their multiple identities inhibits their full engagement as students because they believe they can never truly express their authentic selves.

It is in this light that my research contributes to the representation of Mexican American women in the academy who are the first in their families to attend college. Additionally, my research highlights Mexican American women's general position in society at large. The use of counter narratives in this study serves as the main conduit for the stories of Mexican American women first generation college students in a way that previous and traditional quantitative and

qualitative methods have yet to do by providing data and insight using the very experiences and words these women use to tell their truths.

This research analyzes the current academic struggles of Mexican American women first generation college students who are pursuing bachelors degrees in the United States. Furthermore, this inquiry helps to provide a platform for the voices of Mexican American women students and the cultural and societal expectations they experience. Finally, the study challenges the current notions that view Mexican American women's education struggle from a cultural deficit model. I draw on critical race theory (CRT) to deconstruct normative practices in academia and society that inhibit the academic progress of Mexican American women first generation college students.

Significance of Study

Increased enrolment of Mexican American women first generation college students in higher education does not equate to this population having a supportive and successful experience while in college and on campus. Race, class, and gender complicate their lives. As college students, these women often feel pressured to embody only one of their identities while navigating college, at the expense of their mental, emotional, and physical health. As a result, Mexican American women first generation college students face significant obstacles while trying to engage fully in campus culture while they matriculate. While the increase of Mexican American women on university campuses may suggest positive growth, their increase in numbers does not, by any means, suggest the end of racism, sexism and hierarchal structures. Rather, the increase of Mexican American women on university campuses belies the ways that racism, sexism, classism and patriarchy have refashioned their *look* so as to go unnamed in the academy.

The education of Latina/os, specifically Mexican American first-generation women college students is an issue of social justice. Examining this issue would contribute to understanding how we might facilitate educational equity for women of color. Society cannot accept the current lack of equal education for this population. The future economic and social implications of such stagnant thinking will prove detrimental to society overall as Mexican American women help make up the largest ethnic group in the United States. Within this ethnic group, they outnumber Mexican American men (Hurtado, et al., 2010).

Definition of Terms

As I am focusing on women college students who claim Mexican ancestry, I find it necessary to highlight the differences and similarities among the following terms: Mexican American, Chicana, Latino/Latina, and Hispanic. *Mexican American* is used to identify a person who is a United States citizen and is a descendant of Mexicans. The first written use of the term *Chicana* can be traced back to 1911 in *La Cronica* (Limón, 1979) and then again in an essay by Mexican American writer, Mario Suárez, published in the *Arizona Quarterly* in 1947 (Simmen & Bauerle, 1969). According to the Handbook of Texas (1976):

> "The pre-Columbian tribes in Mexico called themselves Meshicas, and the Spaniards, employing the letter x (which at that time represented a "sh" and "ch" sound), spelled it *Mexicas*. The Indians later referred to themselves as Meshicanos and even as Shicanos, thus giving birth to the term Chicano" (De León, 2013).

Chicana, as defined by Delgado Bernal and Elenes (2011), is a politically charged identity, used by those of Mexican heritage and was created in the 1960s during the Chicano Rights Movement and is often associated with resistance that one "consciously adopt[s] later in life" (p. 100). Some individuals who categorize themselves as Chicana believe that Mexican American still gives

privilege to White America with the term "American." Additionally, the term Chicana and Mexican American may be used in greater capacity depending on geographic region. For example, women of Mexican descent in California may refer to themselves as *Chicana* because California was the birthplace to many of the Mexican political movements such as the Migrant Farm Workers movement and the Chicano Rights Movement. Whereas in Texas, the term *Mexican American* is more commonly claimed as a result of Texas' rich history, such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago (1848), border patrols, and its close proximity with Mexico, and the locale continues to have a close (positive and negative) relationship with Mexico.

Even though a distinction exists between Mexican American and Chicana, a large portion of society uses these identifying terms interchangeably and hones in on the central identity factor of Mexican ancestry. For the purposes of my research, I will use these terms interchangeably acknowledging that while the terms do not exactly identify the same individuals, they encompass the common struggles of a brown woman with Mexican ancestors. Additionally, as some authors toggle between both terms in their writing, I want to respectfully convey their words by keeping the exact term my participants used, rather than simply altering the terminology to one generalized term. Finally, as a native Texan, the term, "Mexican American," no hyphen, is what I answered to and all that I knew. It was not until I began a master's program that the term Chicana entered my vocabulary. My choice to focus my research on "Mexican American women college students" is a reflection of my personal life experience of identifying as a Mexican American woman and by no means is a way to further silence my fellow brown sisters of Mexican descent or distance myself from the political identity that "Chicana" engenders.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the term "Latino" includes individuals whose origin is of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or some other

Hispanic[1] origin. Another set of identifying terms used interchangeably in society is *Latina* and *Hispanic*. When discussing general populations of Spanish speakers, either of these terms is used. However, unlike Mexican American and Chicana, I will *not* shift between the two terms. The term *Latino* was birthed in the 1950s and was used to identify "Persons of Spanish Mother Tongue" (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 75). In the 1970s, the definition of *Latino* shifted to "Persons of both Spanish surname and Spanish Mother Tongue" (ibid). Given flight over 30 years ago, the term Hispanic was used by the Nixon administration when it was added to the census questionnaire in 1970. By the 1980 Census, Hispanic had become the official government term used on census forms, federal, state and municipal applications for employment, general assistance and school enrollment. For my research, I will embrace the term *Latina/Latino* as this is a term that has *not* been placed upon this group by the government but has been claimed by "the people" themselves. Sandra Cisneros, a Mexican American poet and novelist, states, "To me, [Hispanic] it's like a slave name. I'm a Latina." There is not a total consensus on either term, *Hispanic* or *Latino/Latina*, and the naming of one's ethnicity ultimately depends upon the individuals themselves.

Counter Narratives and Mexican American Women in Higher Education

Stories of people of color provide "potent counterpoints to challenge the existing narratives that shape how we understand" the experiences of students of color (Duncan, 2005, p. 200). Histories and narratives of Chicanas and Mexican American women have long been hidden and covered up by the "history of colonialism in the borderlands[2] that has imposed and sustained

[1] "Hispanic" refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. It is a label created by the United States Government.

[2] "Borderlands" (Anzaldua) refers to a space on the outside of societal norms or practices. These spaces are often seen as spaces to hold individuals not worthy of entering such spaces.

oppressive constructions of gender roles, sexuality, and compulsory heterosexuality" (Carrillo, et. al., 2010, p. 479). This history of colonialism has continued to reproduce the idea and practice that Chicana and Mexican American women are to be dominated, physically and mentally (Anzaldúa, 1987; Batalla, 1996). Utilizing counter narratives to uncover the silenced experiences of women of color, specifically Mexican American women, refocuses and honors the "agency these women have exercised in spite of the ravages of colonialism, and document the strategies they use to reconstitute their worlds" (Carillo, et. al., 2010, p. 479). My dissertation project embraces and utilizes stories and counter narratives of Mexican American women first generation college students to counter racist, sexist, and underclassed epistemologies embedded in the "meaning making structures that inform the naturalization of oppression and the normalization of racial inequality" in the higher education academic experience of these women (Duncan, 2005, p. 200).

The use of counter narratives in my dissertation project will serve to combat the misrepresentation and monovocal accounts currently found in literature and society pertaining to Mexican American women in higher education. The counter narratives of my participants give voice and life to the true stories of the experiences of Mexican American women, so that not only they, but future generations of these women can locate, find, connect, and recognize elements of self in literature.

Lorde's (1978) poetry describes the struggle of wanting to speak and find voice:

> *…and when we speak we are afraid/*
> *our words will not be heard/*
> *nor welcomed/*
> *but when we are silent/we are still afraid/*
> *So it is better to speak/ remembering/*
> *we were never meant to survive.* (pp. 31-32)

My dissertation project views Lorde's poetry as a mandate to speak and to use our words for

survival in the academy. In this dissertation I invite ten Mexican American women who are first generation college students to speak and use their words and tell their stories. I utilize counter narratives as a way to not only increase and insert the narratives of Mexican American women first generation college students in the broader literature on (what literature are you participating in?), but also to encourage these women to share, question, feel and speak their lives as valid truths.

Utilizing counter narratives as both method and data analysis within my dissertation project engages the tenants CRT and carves out a new way of viewing Mexican American women first generation college students' experiences by taking their words "seriously and, instead of stopping there, allow[s] these voices to inform how we approach our examination of the material conditions basic to and inextricably a part of lived experience" (Duncan, 2005, p. 205).

Studies using critical race methodology, while differing in focus, always contain the key component of investigating the effects of race. My approach continuously names the connection between race and the unequal and unheard voices of Mexican American women first generation college students. Fernández (2002) conducted a qualitative study utilizing critical race methodology and narratives to highlight the experience of a Latino high school student in Chicago. In "*Telling Stories About School: Using Critical Race and Latino Critical Theories to Document Latina/Latino Education and Resistance,"* Fernández (2002) argues the importance of Latina/Latino students' stories, not as mere additions or exceptions, but as central stories of qualitative studies that strive to better understand the issues these students face in education. Similar to Fernández's study, Chapman (2005) uses critical race methodology to construct a study utilizing portraiture to "tell stories of people who do not have 'voice' in the realm of

academia" (p.28).

Similar to Fernández (2002) and Chapman (2005), I, too, have constructed my dissertation project using critical race methodology. At the core of all aforementioned studies, including my research, is the focus and dedication to creating a space for students' and people of color's voices to be heard. Not only does my research give space for this populations' stories to be heard, my research disrupts the complacency of generalized understanding that currently infects educational literature regarding people of color.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter one introduces the problem, significance, and purpose of the study and discusses its overall major contributions. Chapter two reviews pertinent literature focused into three major sections: 1) Mexican Americans in higher education 2) Factors contributing to academic persistence and achievement, and 3) the importance of and necessity for Critical Race Theory and Borderlands Theory.

Chapter three discusses the methodology used to construct, collect, and report the counter narratives of the study participants. The chapter begins with a discussion of qualitative methods and then moves to a discussion on counter narratives as the most productive method to collect data for the study population. Chapter three then focuses on the research design of the project, discussion of how participants were selected and chosen, and finally discusses on data was analyzed.

Chapter four introduces the participants of the study and provide context and insight into the lives of each woman. Chapter five provides an analysis of data collected and highlights

commonalities and differences between the women's experiences. Finally, Chapter five provides support recommendations, future research, and summary & conclusions of the study. Throughout the chapters, I insert personal narratives, narratives of participants, quotes, as well as poetry within the text to activate the reader's understanding of voice and knowledge that comes in different forms as well as insert stories in unbridled formats.

Chapter 2

Mexican Americans in Higher Education

History of Struggle for Educational Equity

Educational inequalities of Mexican Americans in the United States are not new issues. Prior to 1910, little attention had been given to the educational, health, economic, or political status of Mexican Americans (Sanchez, 1997). As a result of the Mexican Revolution and World War I, many Mexican Americans were driven across the border to escape the effects of war while others were recruited as contract laborers (Sanchez, 1997). Although World War I and II assisted in the facilitation of providing employment, improving work wages, education, and adequate health services via military participation, the overall efforts to improve the conditions of Mexican Americans was still lagging, particularly in Texas (Sanchez, 1997). According to Weinberg (1977), the first study on the education of Mexican American youth in Texas was conducted in 1928 and called attention to a number of inequalities such as unequal access to schooling and resources, school segregation, low financial resources, poor quality of teachers, English only classrooms, and a stereotype of Mexican Americans' intellectual ability (Laija & Ochoa, 1999). Whether attending integrated or segregated schools, Mexican American students were forced to speak English only and physical punishments were implied if Spanish was used in the classroom, despite the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the United States and Mexico that "guaranteed the right of Mexicans to maintain their culture" (Gómez-Quiñones, 1994, Schaefer, 1996, p. 257). In 1931, the first successful national desegregation court case, *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District*, occurred in California. The school board, unbeknownst to the Lemon Grove community, constructed a two-room school building, called *la caballeriza* (barnyard), which would house Mexican school children (Gloria, Castellanos, & Kamimura,

2006, p. xxviii). Mexican families organized a committee that would bring this injustice to the courts. In the end, the Superior Court of California ruled that separating Mexican American students from white students inhibited their "Americanization" process (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Gloria, Castellanos, & Kamimura, 2006). Although *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* was the first nationally successful desegregation court case, its outcome was simply considered a local event (Alvarez, 1986). Underappreciated in the struggle for justice during the civil rights movement, *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947) would serve as a strong foundation for *Brown v. Board* (1954) as the case briefs would later be adapted in representing the plaintiffs of *Brown* (Strum, 2010).

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) whose purpose focused on improving five major areas of education: 1) Assisting disadvantaged children, 2) initiating school libraries, 3) promoting community wide projects on educational change, and 5) improving state departments of education (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). Assisting in plight to identify educational inequalities of Mexican Americans, the United States Commission on Civil Rights published the *Ethnic Isolation of Mexican Americans in the Public Schools of the Southwest* report (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). This report was key to calling attention to educational segregation and its detrimental affect on the educational opportunities of Mexican American students (Pino & Oyando, 2005). However, even after the 1970 case of *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District* that ruled segregation of Chicanos in "Mexican Schools" to be unconstitutional, Spanish speaking children were given separate and unequal treatment (Schaefer, 1996, p. 257). The Hispanic Policy Development Project of 1984 shifted attention from debates over bilingual education to schools' unwillingness and inability to support the needs of non-white children (San Miguel, 1987).

Pino and Oyando state, “The history of Mexican Americans in higher education remained obscure until the civil rights movement of the 1960’s” (2005). Birthed from the struggle to create equal employment and educational opportunities for Chicanos in the United States, the Chicano rights movement spread across the southwest United States in the late 1960s (Flores, 2008). The Chicano rights movement, with its greatest intensity in California, yet still impacting the Southwest, demanded economic, academic, and political equality for oppressed groups in the United States (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). Lack of academic support services, including a careless view on Mexican Americans dropping out of school, were among some of the most prevalent issues of educational inequalities (Schaefer, 1996, p. 257). Today, although the number of academic support programs for this growing population of Latino students is increasing, the retention rates of Mexican Americans student in high school and college as well as the number of these students completing degrees is not.

At its inception, the struggle for academic equality for Mexican Americans was met with animosity, hatred, and resistance. Unequal and unfair treatment of Mexican American students was a normative practice. White students received just academic resources, while Mexican American students were seen as animals unable to learn. However, as the number of supporters grew and Mexican Americans gained access to community and judicial resources, the courts began demanding that access to equal education for Mexican American students be granted and maintained. Although the courts mandated equal services and fair treatment of all students, the way that these services were maintained and the definition of “fair” was left up to interpretation by school districts and educators. Substantial cases like the *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* were seen as a victory for Mexican Americans, but were treated as local victories and

often short lived in their effectiveness to continue educational equality for Mexican Americans in the classroom.

In the following paragraphs, I will highlight and problematize the current status of Mexican Americans in higher education as it relates to basic yet unequal services and unequal support provided to these students. Analysis of the current ways in which Mexican Americans are held at the borders of academic success by empty promises that deter attention from main causes of inequality will be reviewed to illustrate the cyclical historical pattern of educational inequity of Mexican American students in the United States.

Current Status of Mexican Americans Achieving Higher Education Degrees

The estimated Latino population of the United States as of April 1, 2010 was 50.5 million, making people of Latino origin the nation's largest ethnic group (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Latinos constituted 16.3 percent of the nation's total population. An estimated 31.8 million Latinos of Mexican origin resided in the United States in 2010. Mexicans are the largest population of Latinos in the United States, and made up approximately 63.0% of the U.S. Hispanic population in 2010 (USCB, 2011). While the population continues to grow, the number of Mexican Americans earning a higher education degree does not mirror that of the population influx. Although more than half, 67.4 percent, of Mexican Americans obtained at least a high school education in 2010 (United States Census Bureau [USCB], 2011), these students still have the highest dropout rates among all ethnic youth in the United States (Perez & De La Rosa Salazar,1993). These numbers illustrate the stark reality that Chicanas/os obtain the fewest number of bachelor's degrees out of every racial or ethnic group in the United States (Yosso, 2006, p. 99). In 2010, the percentage of Mexican American college students who obtained a

college degree or higher (both undergraduate and graduate students) was 12.6 percent (2006, p. 99).

In 2002, the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans stated:

> If we continue on our present course, one out of every three Hispanic students will be left without a basic high school education, no prospects for college and every likelihood of a life of poverty. If this populous group, growing at five and one half times the rate of non-Hispanic whites, does not take greater advantage of post secondary education, the effect on the United States economy will be gravely negative. If the gap in educational achievement is ignored for another generation, the result will be millions of Hispanics relegated to a minimum-wage and lower skilled existence that is likely to condemn their children to an upbringing of poverty and risk (p. 21).

These austere statistics lead to the question of why the number of Mexican Americans entering and graduating from college continue to be drastically low, even with the understanding of its negative impact on the nation as a whole.

Factors Contributing to Academic Persistence and Achievement

Push Outs, Not Drop Outs

Latinos, specifically Mexican Americans, are being *pushed out* of the American education system. They are not dropping out. Fuentes (2005) calls attention to the term "dropout" that presumes students make a personal decision to withdraw from school. However, the majority of Latina/o students do not dropout, they are being *pushed out*. Whether high school or college, Latina/o students are experiencing inadequate academic preparation in high school,

discrimination, and low set expectations from educators. Hierarchal structures and normative practices facilitate this pushing out of Chicana/o students from the "educational pipeline" (Yosso, 2006, p.4). Castellanos (2006) states, "Latina/os drop out of school due to faulty administrative policies, inept academic practices, questionable teacher expectations, and/or fiscal inequities" (p. 19). Particularly highlighting the ways that Chicano students are being pushed out of the classroom, Yosso contends, "Chicanas/os usually attend overcrowded run-down, and racially segregated schools. Too often, these schools provide low per-pupil expenditures, few well-trained teachers, and limited access to a quality, college-bound curriculum" (2000, p.4). Low rates of Latino college degree completion and stresses of cultural expectations are part of a much larger societal power structure and "pointing the finger at culture in this way excludes the role of gross and systematic disparities" in which larger hegemonic societal structures provide minimal opportunities for cultures considered "other" to reform tradition (Volpp, 2000, p. 97).

First Generation Status

The burden for Mexican Americans to gain academic support and equal access to higher education does not end with the "push out" crisis. Some students carry the identity of being the first in their family to attend college. First-generation college students often experience additional dissonance due to the overall unfamiliarity of the "culture of college". Drop out rates tend to be the highest during the first year of college as new students must separate from family and friends, push against family expectations of staying in the household, and negotiate their multiple identities (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999). In a six-year longitudinal study, Johnson (1997) found that among first-generation students who failed to persist, 75% were women.

While academic stressors and adjusting to the "culture of college" are experienced by all students, the transition to college life is more difficult for Mexican American students in comparison to White students (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Cabrera and Padilla (2004) define "culture of college" as knowledge held by middle-class parents centered around college preparation, such as knowledge of how to fill out applications, funding sources, and standardized testing (p. 154). Cabrera and Padilla's (2004, p. 154) "culture of college" study focused on two Mexican heritage students in college and findings acknowledged that poverty, learning English, lack of peer support, racism, and alienation are college struggles for Mexican American first-generation college students. Latinos, more specifically Chicanos, are "missing from higher education -- in al roles" (Schaefer, p. 291, 1996). Few Chicano faculty and administrators in higher education is perpetuated by the all too familiar *educational pipeline*: Few Chicano high school students graduate, leading to even fewer Chicano college students.

Unwelcoming and Unsupportive Campus Environments

Stories of Mexican American women in higher education, particularly low-income women, infer that "they experience significant stressors due to ethnic, racial, and class discrimination" (Zambrana, 2011, p. 111). Educators hold low expectations of Mexican American women's abilities to perform well as students. These educational inequalities and disadvantages are not new and are often experienced by these women since grade school (Zambrana, 2011, p. 111). Additional narratives reveal that stereotypes and feelings of not belonging present detrimental barriers to positive and successful undergraduate experiences. Although not explicitly stated, some institutions present an unwelcoming environment with their

lack of Latino Studies academic programs, lack of recognition of Latinidad, and lack of "creating new intellectual spaces discourses" (Zambrana, 2011, p. 111).

Another supportive affiliation that affects a campus environment for Mexican American women is that of a relationship with faculty of color. Faculty members of color provide mentorship and advocacy to students of color on campuses. As role models, faculty have a positive effect on some students' grade point averages (Cole & Barber, 2003). Maruyama and Moreno (2000) suggest that faculty of color are more focused on mentoring and supporting students of color and are better prepared to process, assist, and validate issues of diversity with students as they may share similar personal experiences. However, as there are low numbers of Latinos entering higher education, few Latino faculty members are being produced. As a result, there are few faculty members in the academy who will mentor and train Latino graduate students for faculty positions: This creates a vicious cycle (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 1999). In *Facing the Data* (2013), Nwankwo and Rodríguez provide personal counter narratives of the support received during their undergraduate and graduate careers from faculty of color, and discuss the imperative nature of mentorship of students of color by faculty of color. Rodríguez (2013) states, "The steadfast encouragement and backing of my undergraduate professors—preparing me for advanced study, suggesting suitable doctoral programs, and writing many letters of recommendation—was the key factor that landed me on [table 1c of] the report as one of the seventy-two students from Berkeley who went on to complete a PhD in the humanities". This mentorship did not only assist in Rodríguez complete his undergraduate degree, but it propelled him over the chasm between the undergraduate and graduate careers that is present for students of color.

The Impact of Socioeconomic Placement

> ***"Poverty is a powerful predictor of failing to graduate…Almost 9 of 10 instensely segregated schools also have concentrated poverty"*** (Orfield et al., 2004, p. 6).

For the vast number of Latina/o students living in poverty and attending segregated schools in the United States, college is rarely seen as an expectation and far removed from the norm (Garza, 2006). Financial burdens and hardships make college an impossible dream for many. Among low-income Latino families, children are socialized based on the economic status of their parents. Zambrana (2011) reports following scholarly findings on low-income Mexican and Puerto Rican families:

- Specific family responsibilities, such as sibling care and economic contributions, in low-income Latino families have been linked to less time and emphasis on educational goals (Gándara, 1995, 1999; Zambrana et al., 1997).
- Closely related are more traditional gender role attitudes and behaviors among low-income families that hinder independence in pursing one's individual goals, such as education (Gonzalez-Ramos et al., 1998).
- Latino mothers are viewed as passive yet respected and honored as the heart of the family (Rodriguez, 1999). Fathers are described as the head of the household, seat of authority, and provider for the family (Mirande, 1997).

Zambrana (2011) highlights the connection of Socioeconomic placement (SEP) to traditional gender roles of female submissiveness and male domination and states "traditional gender role expectations are more likely to exist in low-income Latino families than in middle-class Latino families (p. 49). Children of low-income families often play an instrumental role in family needs, such as caring for younger siblings so parents could work a job to support the family.

The assumption that naturally gifted students only reside in economically advanced neighborhoods contributes to the widening of academic achievement gaps for students of color. Although not all students of color reside in lower income neighborhoods, large portions of

families of color do inhabit these neighborhoods, due to racialized economic practices. As such, differences in economic, cultural, and social capital between classes are a large determinant of a student's chances of succeeding in school (Dahan, 2011). The effects of poor resources and poor support for students in low-income school districts directly affects the level of preparedness for higher education and the job market (Hurtado et al., 2010). Middle and upper class cultural capital defines the values and societal norms of the education system, leaving students of color struggling to fit in with the dominant culture of the classroom.

Financial literacy and education is imperative to the success of Latino students and their families. Limited family financial resources creates additional risk factors that increase responsibilities for Latino students (Garcia, 2000). Garza (2006) states that counselors and teachers must take up the responsibility of clarifying the economic benefits of attending and graduating from college to Latina/o students and their families. Receiving financial assistance for higher education assists in equalizing the "playing field and opportunities" for Latino students (Hu & St. John, 2001). According to a study conducted by Eitel and Martin (2009), first-generation college students initially perceived financial aid as an unclear process that had many unwritten and unreasonable requirements. Lack of financial resources may cause these students to obtain employment that compromises an adequate amount of time for studying and educational activities, such as advising appointments (Fry, 2003). Working more hours to fill financial obligations (self or familial) coupled with classes has a negative effect on first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Gendered Experiences

The same obstacles that have existed historically exist for us as Chicanas in society. No matter how we cut

it, the structures of patriarch, male domination, racial domination, and particularly class domination have not fundamentally changed. Maybe they have been elasticized a little bit--they've always elasticized to let one or two of us in--but fundamentally those structures remain, and we brush up against those structures.

--Antonia Castaneda (quoted in de la Torre & Pesquera,1993, p. 233)

While Mexican American men and women university students encounter challenges in college, experiences differ by gender (Lopez, 1995). Identity politics play a role both in the Mexican American culture and society for Mexican American women and Latinas as a whole. "Exposing gender as a fundamental category of social relations both within and outside the family" has shifted the way family dynamics are understood (Zinn, 1996, p. 171). The identity of gender is "rigorously and authoritatively delineated and enforced within *la cultura Latina* and is used as a tool of oppression to marginalize women who do not conform to the regulated gender and sex mold of a "Latina" (Hernández-Truyol, 2003). The term gender refers to "social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts" and is learned (Fine, 1993).

The road to education is not an easy process for Latinas, specifically Mexican American women. Coining the term "intersectionality," Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) discusses the relationships between race, class, politics, society, and gender. She argues that treating gender and race as mutually exclusive identities dissolves agency for women of color by deeming experiences that are both racially and gender charged insignificant, ultimately erasing these women's entire existence.

The National Council of La Raza (1990) reported that Latino men tend to drop out of

high school to find employment, whereas Latina women drop out for "personal reasons (e.g., familial responsibilities)" and tend to drop out earlier in their educational experience when compared to men (Castallenos et. al., 2006, p. 26). In *Promoting the educational achievement of mexican american young women,* Aguilar (1996) investigates the experiences of 84 women. When discussing the issue of sexism, Aguilar captures the experiences of some women reporting, "Daughters were expected to assume traditional spousal roles, prepare for marriage, marry within their race, and bow to men" (p. 151). Men in these families had more freedom date, attend college out of town, and had fewer family obligations (p. 152). Underrepresented in higher education coupled with a large percentage of Latino parents with little or no college experience (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002), "young women who do enroll in 4-year programs are further at risk of experiencing conflict between the expectations of their home and school contexts" (Sy & Romero, 2008, p. 214).

Many first-generation Latino students, particularly Latinas, have cultural roles to respect within their families and cultural expectations to fulfill. Along with a close family relationship, often Latinos identify the woman as the primary family caretaker (Cammarota, 2004). Many first-generation Latina college students serve as primary translators for their parents. Negotiating bank statements, government paperwork, and other English focused processes in society can prove daunting for Latino families, and as such, these women must assume familial adult responsibilities while working to navigate a new college environment (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006, p. 9). Additional responsibilities include that of family caretaker for younger siblings or sick or elderly parents (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). Feeling obligated to fulfill their role as a woman in the family, Mexican American first-generation women college students may have less time to devote

to their collegial endeavors (Sy & Romero, 2008). Stress is often amplified when the responsibility of fulfilling these cultural expectations and obligations is coupled with the "parents' lack of understanding of what it takes to be successful in college" (ibid, p. 220).

The term *Marianismo* can be used to describe the cultural roles Mexican American women fulfill. *Marianismo* is a concept that defines the set of cultural expectations for women and girls prescribing a certain level of family commitment, respect for authority, and restrictions of achievement (Denner & Dunbar, 2004). While this expectation is reflected in the larger hetero-normative society, the cultural expectation of *marianismo*[3] in the Mexican culture adds the element of submissiveness of women's personal needs and the expectation that family needs come first. In this ideology, Chicanas' concerns can only exist within the space of *la familia*[4] and her freedom from cultural and societal oppression lies only within serving as a wife and mother (Rodríguez, 2009). "Freedom," therefore, is not real for the Chicana, as it is only afforded to her when she performs in assigned roles.

It is imperative to call attention to, and name, overarching social structures and forces that portray the Mexican culture as self-defeating. Utilizing Critical Race Theory to unearth these dominant societal forces is imperative to identify and understand that culture is not to blame. When reporting on a study that documented higher dropout rates for Hispanics in the United States (conducted by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation), the media associated high dropout rates of Latinas to "cultural values":

[3] *"Marianismo"* defines the set of Mexican cultural expectations for women and girls prescribing a certain level of family commitment, respect for authority, and restrictions of achievement (Denner & Dunbar, 2004).
[4] *"La Familia*" translates to "The Family" in the English language.

> Schools must do more to recognize cultural values that saddle Hispanic girls with family responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings after school, that take away from educational endeavors… "Many Latinas face pressure about going to college from boyfriends and fiancés who expect their girlfriends or future wives not to be 'too educated' and from peers who accuse them of 'acting white' when they attempt to become better educated or spend time on academics" (Gamboa, 2001, p. IA).

The media report fails to recognize structural factors that may be causing Latinas to "fail," such as poverty. When discussed, the blame is placed on cultural practices, family income, and language deficiencies. Rather, "context, community, and family form a seamless network leading to educational progress" (Hurtado, et. al., 2010). These cultural practices, if embraced by the academy, could be used as a "platform to engage student sin the learning process" (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006, p. 9).

In a study conducted by Yosso (2006), she highlights Chicana/o undergraduate experiences and the way in which these students experience racialized campus climate. Discussing how she navigates cultural values and the university, a Chicana student states:

> Chicana/o students incorporate the cultural values of our families/communities into the university and we also utilize university resources to fulfill the needs of our families/communities. Often motivated by a desire to "give back to our communities, critical navigation between multiple worlds ironically helps "incorporate" Chicana/o students into various university communities and greatly contributes to our academic and social success. Our activities both on and off campus empower us, but sometimes it's

hard to balance between academic responsibilities as a university student and participation in academic and social counterspaces (p. 124).

This close relationship with family creates culturally valuable skills that Latino students bring with them to their academic settings. Literary works by Chicana lesbian writer Cherríe Moraga provide an opposing view that supports a fluid space where *la familia* can critically analyze itself while protecting the Chicano/a community. Embracing Moraga's perspectives, Rodríguez (2009) provides a summation of her views on family: "the family is a collective consciousness premised on a shared opposition to such oppressions all the while contesting heteropatriarchal kinship relations" (p. 7).

Located on the Border of Cultures

Mexican American women live on borders. A Mestiza, located between multiple cultures, the Mexican American woman is viewed as neither Mexican or American. Constructed to define spaces that are safe, unsafe, and acceptable, borders distinguish the other from the normative group. Anzaldúa (1987) describes borders as a "dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (p. 3). This is where Mexican American women reside in the United States:

Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,

alma[5] entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,

me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.

Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 377).

The identity of gender cannot be separated from the identity of culture. Latinas' "multiple otherness" in society (due to their ethnicity and sex) and in their culture (due to their sex) make the borders where Latinas are given access to navigate forever gendered. The term gender refers to "social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts" and is learned (Fine, 1993). Although Mexican American women may shift from one culture or identity to another, as stated by Anzaldúa, they are always held within the borderlands. Anzaldua (1990), in *Haciendo caras, una entrada*, states:

> For silence to transform into speech, sounds, and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies. For the Body to give birth to utterance, the human entity must recognize itself as carnal--skin, muscles, entrails, brain, belly. Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized, or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through them. *No hables de esas cosas, de eso no se habla. No hables, no hables. Cállate! Estate quit*. Seal your lips, woman! When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses (p. 133).

Regardless of the terms she uses to identify herself, (Latina, Chicana, Tejana, or another term) she will always be read as "other" and non-white by society, and in tern, the "Ivory Tower".[6] In

[5] "*Alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio. Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente*" translates to "*Soul between two worlds, three, four, my head buzzing with the contradictory. I am guided by all the voices that speak to me simultaneously"*.

[6] "Ivory Tower" is another term for a university and speaks to the White hegemonic structures that function within a university setting.

the current pursuit of higher education degrees, Mexican American women college students, "in the end…[she must choose between the two worlds: if [she] intends to succeed as a student, [she] must, literally and figuratively, separate [herself] from [her] family… (Rodriguez, 1975, p. 17).

The Importance of and Necessity for Critical Race Theory and Borderlands Theory

Much of current literature discusses Mexican American students in conjunction with the larger Latino population of students. While this literature provides a beneficial and necessary general discussion of Latino students, grouping Latinos together in this cultural category, specific cultural experiences of students are lost, particularly those of Mexican descent. Sources such as the United States Census reports on Mexican American educational attainment report overall education rates, but do not specifically highlight the category of Mexican American women. Literature that discusses the "educational pipeline" (Yosso, 2000) of Chicana/Chicano students, while extremely necessary and crucial to the plight of educational equality, group women and men together, making the experiences of Mexican American women invisible. Latinas, when seen, are viewed as foreign, not based simply on their ancestral and cultural heritage, but also due to their sex, language, and sexuality. CRT aims to give voice to "the other" in society and advocates for the "strength and complexity of people of color" (Chapman, 2005). CRT embraces the multiple identities intertwined in communities and people of color that have historically been viewed through a deficit lens. Coining the term "intersectionality", Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) discusses the relationships between race, class, politics, society, *and* gender. She argues that treating gender and race as mutually exclusive identities dissolves agency for women of color by deeming experiences that are both racially and gender charged insignificant, ultimately erasing these women's entire existence.

> *Necesitamos teoŕias [we need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods . . . We are articulating new positions in the "in- between," Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies . . . social issues such as race, class, and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our mestizaje theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones*. (Anzaldua, 1990, pp. xxv-xxvi).

In the above excerpt, Anzaldua calls attention to the need for theories that will engage and fight for the lived experiences of individuals who do not neatly fit into individual categories. Like Crenshaw, Anzaldua highlights the need for focus on intersectionality of identities that intertwine, cross, and blur borders.

There are a number of challenges, often erased and hidden in dominant society, that impact the education experience of Mexican American women first-generation college students due to their "borderland" and "other" status in society. These challenges are weaved into the White hegemonic structure of education so much so that, similar to a fish in a fishbowl whose clear bowl is often not *seen*, "the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the large world" (Morrison, 1992, p. 17). Borderlands are physical, mental, spiritual, and societal spaces that distinguish the *other* from the normative group. Anzaldúa (1987) describes borders as a "dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary…The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (p. 3). This issue of cultural capital and normative practices in education greatly affects Mexican American girls and women in education. Stricken

with being seen as abnormal in education due to the intersectionality of culture, race, class, immigrant status, sexuality, native language, and gender, Mexican American girls and women struggle to learn and uphold the dominant cultural values that they are constantly subject to. Barajas and Pierce (2001) state that in order for students to succeed in the academy, they must assimilate to the dominant culture thus being forced to deny a part of their identity to succeed. Even if these women assimilate to using the dominant cultural values of education, they are still perceived as an outsider due to their Mexican American identity.

Foundations of Critical Race Theory

In 1881, Oliver Wendell Holmes named *Legal Realism* as the movement that called attention to the social and political context in which judicial judgments were made (Boyle, 1992) During the time of the Civil Rights Movement, Legal Realism resurfaced as Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CLS contended that white males dominated other groups via social and political power and a change was necessary (Taylor, 2009) Emerging from CLS as a critique of the lack of focus on race in legal theory and "traditional civil rights litigation in the United States" (Crenshaw, et.al., 1996, p. 2), Critical Race Theory is outlined by the following five tenants:

1. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is endemic in United States society, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically.

2. Critical Race Theory crosses epistemological boundaries.

3. Critical Race Theory reinterprets civil rights law in light of its limitations, illustrating that laws to remedy racial inequality are often undermined before they can be fully implemented.

4. Critical Race Theory portrays dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of powerful entities of society.

5. Critical Race Theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical

examination of the law and society. (Crenshaw, et. al., 1996, pp. 234-235).

Critical Race Theory embraces both academic scholarship and cultural traditions of oral history and storytelling to combat science and legislative constructs that continue the oppressive cycle of stereotypes and marginalization of people of color. For the purposes of this research, I utilize CRT as a theoretical framework and methodology. I define race as a social construct that binds a vast group of people together based on ancestry, significant physical attributes (particularly skin color), and/or "historical contingency" (Haney López, 2000, p. 165). Rather it is an "ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing" process that cannot be biologically proven, as there is no gene that determines one's race. (Haney López, 2000, p. 165). Race is the key component to which Western ideals are shaped (Mills, 1997). Ethnicity is defined as a way of asserting distinctiveness and creating a sense of commonality via character or qualities of an ethnic group (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008).

CRT redefined racism as not simply just the action of individuals, but also as political and legal structures that embedded White European supremacy at their cores (Taylor, 2009). CRT is not based on abstract ideals, but rather specific occurrences and observations, "including society's acceptance of racism as ordinary, the phenomenon of whites allowing black progress when it also promotes their interests (interest convergence), the importance of understanding the historic effect of European colonialism, and the preference of the experiences of oppressed peoples (narrative) over the "objective" opinions of whites" (Taylor, 2009, p. 4). There are seven main constructs within CRT: 1) Interest convergence, 2) whiteness as property, 3) counterstory/ counter narrative, 4) critique of liberalism, 5) racial realism, 6) restrictive vs. expansive view of equality, and 7) social change (Bell, 1980). Previously mentioned, the construct of *interest convergence* was first theorized by Derrick Bell (1980) and argues, "interests of Blacks in

gaining racial equality have been accommodated only when they have converged with the interests of powerful Whites (Taylor, 2009, p. 5). *Whiteness as property* will be discussed in the next section regarding education as a white property. *Counter stories/counter narratives* are stories of marginalized individuals in society and are methods and tools for "exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Solorzano & Yosso, YEAR, p. 138). CRT demands a *critique of liberalism* and argues that "racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 22). Current legal processes geared towards gaining civil rights are slow and limited due to liberal legal precedence (Ladson-Billings, 1999). *Racial realism* "challenges the philosophy of education to encounter the possibility of theorizing about race from the much- denied position that accepts its permanence" (Curry, 2008, p. 42). Bell (1992) states, "Black people will never gain full equality in this country, even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance" (p. 12). Dixson and Rosseau (2006), when unpacking a *restrictive vs. expansive view of equality* utilize Crenshaw (1988) to define the two views:

> The expansive view stresses equality as a result, and looks to real consequences for African Americans. It interprets the objective of anti-discrimination law as the eradication of the substantive conditions of Black subordination and attempts to enlist the institutional power of the courts to further the national goal of eradicating the effects of racial oppression. The restrictive view, which exists side by side with the expansive view, treats equality as a process, downplaying the significance of actual outcomes. The primary objective of anti-discrimination law, according to this vision, is to prevent future

wrongdoing rather than to redress present manifestations of past injustice (pp. 1341-1342).

Understanding the contrast between restrictive and expansive thought and occurrences can be an important analytical tool, when applied, for identifying equity and inequities in education (Dixson and Rosseau, 1996).

CRT challenges single perspectives of race, gender, and class and argues that a "larger body of published work by scholars of color is necessary to ensure the accurate telling of stories from underrepresented groups" (Chapman, 2005, p. 30). As such, Critical Race Theory serves as a strong catalyst for change on the invisible and silencing nature of literature that currently does not *specifically* discuss the intersectionality and impacts of race, class, gender, language, immigrant status, accent, and sexual orientation of Mexican American students, specifically women, students' educational opportunity and attainment.

Critical Race Theory and Education

Race and racism are embedded and pervade every aspect of society. They are "so ingrained in political, legal, and educational structures that they are almost unrecognizable" (Delgado, 1995). Held as the unnamed standard for the global political system, White supremacy has forcefully shaped the modern world, but its domination is rarely mentioned in textbooks and education (Mills, 1997). Within American society, certain actions and identities have been deemed "American" and white; anything that falls outside of this category is deemed illegal and irrational. Exemplifying this is Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, where the author highlighted African American cultural differences and implored "anxieties that constructed African Americans as figures of non-heteronormativity who could potentially throw the American social

order into chaos" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 88). Myrdal also associates rationality with morality and ultimately being human and attests that "identifying with rationalisms is part of the initiation into American citizenship, uniting citizens across the particularities of race, ethnicity, class, and gender" (ibid, p. 90). Just as black is deemed irrational, non-white is too deemed irrational, and therefore not American. Whiteness, therefore, can be interpreted as a property with attached privileges.

Harris (1993) discusses the CRT construct of "whiteness as property" and highlights how "whiteness" has, and still is, being protected by whites and is seen as property. This property has been protected throughout history by legal mandates as well as by social structures and is continued social practice through the Racial Contract (Mills, 1997). Whiteness affords rights and privileges that increase growth and survival of whites while keeping non-white groups in non-dominant positions. Just as education and higher educational opportunities increase financial status and social capital in society, it is seen as a privilege for only those who are deemed worthy of receiving this white property. When discussing knowledge sharing and education, Anzaldúa (1990) posits:

> Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept from us--entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is *vital* that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow whitemen and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies we transform that theorizing space" (p. xxv; emphasis in original).

Calling attention to ways in which Latinos as knowledge constructionists have been dehumanized, Bordieu argues that knowledges of upper and middle classes in society are greatest valued which explains why the "academic and social outcomes of People of Color are significantly lower than the outcomes of whites" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Often utilizing the assumption that Latino students are "disadvantaged", schools structure supports that they believe will increase the abilities and cultural capital of these students (Valenzuela, 1999).

Unlike ethnicity, race has been assumed to remain constant across generations by the United States Census Bureau. When inquiring about ethnicity, the Census Bureau asks respondents about their personal birth country as well as that of their parents. While race is viewed as permanent, ethnicity is not viewed as fixed. Currently the census questionnaire allows for respondents to choose from four racial categories: White, Black, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander. The category of "other" is also offered as an option. The only instance where "Hispanic Americans" were classified as a race was in 1930 (Anderson & Feinberg, 1999). The discourse about race has been "most fundamentally shaped by the definitions of who is 'Black' and who is 'White' in American society" (Davis, 1991).

Harris' (1993) argument of "whiteness as property" is also expressed by Haney López (2000) when discussing the miscategorization of Latinos as part of the white race. As the largest and fastest growing non-white population in the United States, the influx of Mexican Americans continues to drive the debate over the classification of Latinos as an *ethnicity* versus a *race*. Even though the Latino population is labeled "White", they are not afforded all that comes along with this "property", thus safeguarding the full property for those who are part of the racial contract (Mills, 1997). Categorized as White has brought more inequality than equity for Latinos. Haney López (2000), in *The Salience of Race*, argues that the decision of whether or not a racial label is

appropriate for a group should not simply rely on whether said group has been "subject to a demonstrable history of racialization, but on a careful balancing of the benefits of such language compared to its costs" (p. 67).

"Critical Race Theory makes the once invisible visible" and creates space for critical race scholars to deconstruct common school practices and reconstruct them with the insights and voices of the "greatest stakeholders" at the core -- "those who experience the brunt of educational injustice" (Duncan, 2005, p. 209). The focus on *voice* provides CRT a means to create avenues of communication to share the experiences and realities of the oppressed, which Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest is the "first step on the road to justice" (p. 58). CRT, in theory and praxis, strives to create the circumstances that eliminate the power of race to predict schooling and life outcomes, via its commitment to social justice, racial emancipation and societal change (Fernández, 2002). It is instrumental in giving voice to students who are regularly not heard, "thus allowing students to provide their own perspectives on their educational experiences" (Teranishi, 2002, p. 152). Conducting educational research through a CRT lens directly connects as "the classroom--where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed--is a central site for the construction of social and racial power" (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 5). The way in which the "dialogue of people of color" has been silenced is an educational tragedy. These voices are required for a complete unearthing and reconstruction of the education system that will justly provide opportunities and support Mexican American women pursuing bachelor's degrees (Ladson-Billings & Tate, p. 58, 1995).

Chapter 3

Methodology

The presentation of truth in new forms provokes resistance, confounding those committed to accepted measures for determining the quality and validity of statements made and conclusions reached, and making it difficult for them to respond and adjudge what is acceptable. (Bell, 1992)

Holding experiences of people of color at its core, Critical Race Theory uses stories of individuals and communities of color as a means to examine racial formations and social practices that normalize inequality and oppression (Duncan, 2005). As such, Critical Race theory "privileges the voices of those who bear the brunt of inequalities in society and relies heavily on storytelling, as opposed to analytic means, as a methodology to represent them" (Duncan, 2005, p. 200). Storytelling and narratives, while acknowledging race as permeating all avenues of society, allow for the intersections of Mexican American first generation college women multiple identities to speak. While larger society holds these women at the borderlands or borders, critical race narratives and counter narratives allow for this population of women to speak about and against the barriers and borders they face.

I begin this chapter by briefly defining the methodology of qualitative inquiry and the method of counter narrative to position understanding of such inquiry. Following this section, I share the process of how I chose to focus on this project and what fueled my choice to research Mexican American women first generation college students pursuing their Bachelor's degree. Afterward, I will discuss the research design, data collection, and analysis protocol for data. Finally, I will share what I have learned as it relates to my method and what improvements and adjustments were made throughout analysis.

Qualitative Methodology

Function and Purpose of Qualitative Inquiry

There is no general agreement of a specific definition of Qualitative Inquiry (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). Calling upon its ambiguity, Schwandt (2001) notes that qualitative "does not clearly signal a particular meaning or denote a specific set of characteristics" (p. 213). Few textbook authors attempt to specifically define qualitative inquiry, however, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest an intricate definition that includes a transformative approach to the observations and interpretations of qualitative inquiry:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self…qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3).

More than simply a way to gather data, qualitative inquiry is a way of approaching and interacting with the world. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) highlight eight constructs that make up this qualitative research:

1. Qualitative researchers are concerned with the meanings people attach to things in their lives.
2. Qualitative research as inductive.
3. In qualitative methodology the researcher looks at settings and people holistically; people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables, but are viewed as a whole.

4. Qualitative researchers are concerned with how people think and act in their everyday lives.
5. For the qualitative researcher, all perspectives are worthy of study.
6. Qualitative researchers emphasize the meaningfulness of their research.
7. For the qualitative researcher, there is something to be learned in all settings and groups.
8. Qualitative research is a craft (p. 11).

The methods and ways in which questions are constructed illustrate what the researcher deems valuable as knowledge, reality, and how they interpret the world (Cook, YEAR). Webster and Mertova (2007) explain that "professional experience cannot be captured just through empirical methods, summarizing this experience and issues surrounding it using statistical figures…such an approach is insufficient and restricting" (p. 3). Noblit, Flores & Murillo (2004) suggest that researchers in education may utilize qualitative research to represent and include the oppressed voice of "the other" in scholarly research.

Counter Narrative as Method

Storytelling Creates and Challenges

Storytelling has been a historical and contemporary tradition across all cultures. However, in African American, Chicana/Chicano, and Native American cultures, storytelling assists in continuing and passing on traditions within these communities that are not seen as normative and are therefore not included in history books or American folklore (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Storytelling is at the core of history (Scott, 2011). It makes lived experiences meaningful. The ability to create stories is the way one writes themselves into history (Arendt,

1958). The tradition of storytelling, or oral history, remains a key tool for passing down cultural practices to generations who often cannot find *their* history in written textbook form. Fuertes (2012) states:

> "Storytelling is an effective tool in transforming the negative energy of trauma into something constructive, especially in settings where oral tradition remains strong. The entire process of storytelling…can bring the whole community to a consciousness of history with a strong appreciation of their individual and societal resilience. The experience of telling stories enables a community to plan and implement the course of action that people want to undertake, and further affirms their being active participants in social healing and community building" (p. 333).

Delgado (1989) explains, "oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation" (p. 2436). Also discussed as *narrative*, storytelling functions on multiple levels as it allows for the unearthing of "a more layered reality than is immediately apparent" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, 321). As one of its strengths, storytelling assists in addressing the complexities and nuances of the human lived experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Stated simply by Delgado (1989), "The same object, as everyone knows, can be described in many ways" (p. 2416). An object seen as one way by one individual can be seen as something entirely different by another. Just as there is no single "right" way to view a specific object, there also is no single true way to interpret life experiences or events. Just as race is socially constructed, so too is much of reality. That which is seen as "truth" is decided simultaneously with what "ought to be" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2416). Patterns and routines create a sense of safety, and as such, patterns of perception become habitual, tempting society with the notion that things are "inevitable, or the best that can be in an imperfect word" (Delgado, 1989,

p. 2417). New ways of viewing reality are rarely explored. If explored, these new views and perspectives are simply entertained with mockery, categorized as abnormal and outlandish, and immediately rejected.

Storytelling and narratives utilize four important methodological functions that benefit people of color in various ways: 1) Participants are allowed to reflect on their own personal experiences, 2) marginalized participants can speak to their story and claim it as their own, 3) storytelling or counter storytelling subverts the dominant story constructed by Whites, 4) storytelling can be used to transform and empower (Fernández, 2002). Created and utilized to combat majoritarian stories, counter-storytelling is a tool that Critical Race Theory scholars employ to contradict racist characterizations of social life. Solorzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" and are held at the margins or borders of society (p. 32). In this sense, the use of counter-stories gives *voice* by allowing individuals to name their personal realities. Delgado infers that naming one's own reality is imperative in society because: 1) The majority of reality is socially constructed, 2) stories provide members of outgroups tools for self-preservation, and 3) the exchange of stories from the teller to the listener can help "overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the word in one way" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Majoritarian stories, master narratives, or dominant narratives, are the retold account of events by members of dominant/majority groups. An example of a majoritarian story is the majority acceptance of the "history" of the United States. These stories "generate from a legacy of racial privilege . . . white privilege is often expressed through Majoritarian stories'' (Solo rzano & Yosso , 2002, p. 28). The dominant societal group continuously justifies its power by using routine explanations that construct reality that always give privilege to the dominant group

(Delgado Bernal and Villalpando, 2002). Majoritarian stories tell the experience of the dominant group as truth and assume that what is beneficial for the dominant group is best for everyone (Calmore, 1995). Monticenos (1995) explains:

> The use of a master narrative to represent a group is bound to provide a very narrow depiction of what it means to be Mexican-American, African-American, White, and so on. . . A master narrative essentializes and wipes out the complexities and richness of a group's cultural life . . . A monovocal account will engender not only stereotyping but also curricular choices that result in representations in which fellow members of a group represented cannot recognize themselves (pp. 293-294).

Additionally Love (2004) argues that these stories are constructed so that responsibility for their own subordination falls on the subordinated people. Majoritarian stories are not just stories of racial privilege, they are also stories of gender, class, and other forms of privilege. Dominant narratives carry multiple layers of assumptions based on racism, sexism, and classism (Solo´rzano & Yosso, 2002). These majoritarian stories create the notion that being a man, upper class, heterosexual, and White are normal, thus bestowing privilege on those who identify as such and marking all others as abnormal. Ikemoto (1997) states, "The standard legal story does not expressly speak to race and class. By failing to look to the experience of women who have been raced and impoverished, we let the standard story blind and silence us. The de facto standard then used to identify, prioritize, and address subordination is the experience of White middle class women. This excludes and diminishes women of color, particularly those who live in poverty" (p. 136). In literature, law making, and society, the use of master narratives to represent an outgroup provides only a narrow and saccharine illustration of what it means to be Mexican American, African American, lower class, etc.

The construction of majoritarian stories utilizes several specific tools to assist in obscuring white privilege and thus create the façade that it is normal and true. These tools include invisibility, universal normative assumptions, false construction of schools as neutral and apolitical, the myth of meritocracy, suggesting that education is equal for all, and "othering" individuals who are not socially classified as dominants (Delgado, 1995; Solorzano, 1977; Yosso, 2002). Collectively, these tools work to obscure white privilege and obscure the subordination of people of color via various forms of regulations of organizational and institutional life (Love, 2004).

Functioning as a primary tool of majoritarian storytelling, the myth of meritocracy has seven components that strengthen its hold on what is viewed as normal and fair in society: 1) neutrality, 2) colorblindness, 3) objective standards of performance, 4) equal opportunity to meet performance standards, 5) fair methods of assessment and evaluation, 6) unbiased reporting of performance results, and 7) the allocation of merit to those whose performance meets the standards specified (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Alice Walker (1974) states, "Man, like all the other animals, fears and is repelled by that which he does not understand, and mere difference is apt to connote something malign" (p. 28). The myth of meritocracy allows the majority group to deny counter stories out of fear, but cover up this fear as logical.

Counter-storytelling aims to expose race neutral discourse to reveal how white privilege operates within an ideological framework to reinforce and support unequal societal relationships between whites and people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). There are several objectives to the use of storytelling and counter-narratives: 1) To challenge the dominant ideologies and myths, 2) to give the point of view of minorities, 3) to incite sympathy and consciousness from

the dominant group when stories of oppression are shared, 4) and to illuminate how individuals reconcile their contrasting identities (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998; Duara, 1995; Taylor, 2009).

Counter narratives function to undermine racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist narratives. They serve as tools for survival, resistance, and work to build social, political, and cultural cohesion among marginalized groups. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) highlight four ways that storytelling, specifically counter stories, function: (a) They can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems, (c) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (p. 36).

In an effort to explain and illustrate these four functions, I utilize first round data to supply context. Many of my participants shared that they feel alone during their college experience. These women felt like they were the only ones on campus dealing with financial, familial, and issues surrounding gender, that will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section of this dissertation. Through this study, these women's stories not only assisted in creating a community of understanding for women with similar experiences, but their very participation in this study created a community for them. The participants of this study also challenge perceived dominant notions of how the Mexican American culture does not value education, particularly for women, by providing insight into the support provided by the families of participants. Counter narratives shared by my participants serve as heroine stories to future

Mexican American women pursuing college degrees by illustrating their determination and fight to achieve, even when the institution was not made for their success, and provide motivation to succeed. Utilizing these stories of triumph and applying it to their current reality, future Mexican American college women can insert themselves into spaces and construct a reality that is focused on their needs. The use and purpose of stories for outgroups[7], as mentioned by Delgado (1989), allows for the creation of "their own bonds, represent cohesion, shared understandings, and meanings and do not need to be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories. The cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup. An outgroup creates its own stories, that serve as a "counter-reality" for the group (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412).

Critiques of CRT and Counter Narratives

While critical race theorists and educators find storytelling powerful, reconstructive, and an avenue for truth and voice, there are various critiques and criticisms about the functioning, validity, and overall existence of storytelling as a form of data in qualitative research. The emphasis of privileging voices of color has met criticism that questions the "burden of proof of the existence of fundamental cognitive differences between subjugated and dominant voices" (Farber & Sherry, 1995, p. 287). Critics argue that the difference in voices of color and dominant voices lies in the content. Critics of Critical Race Theory also claim that the use of the voices of people of color and storytelling techniques "piggyback on feminist scholarship and rarely draw on independent social science for support" (Farber & Sherry, 1995, p. 287).

Another major focus that critics question is whether academics of color can represent oppressed individuals given their privileged status in society, specifically the academic sphere.

[7] *Outgroup* refers to a group not deemed "dominant" in society.

Critical Race Theory and storytelling opponents argue that focusing on specific racial voices "minimizes the heterogeneous experience of people of color" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 383). Additionally, critics charge that allowing academics of color to formulate these stories via people of color's stories simply promotes the black middle class and allows for groups with privilege to continue to gain advantages at the expense of subordinate groups (Duncan, 2005). This critique, however, fails to highlight the fact some scholars of color who focus on utilizing counter narratives are "of the people" and actually grew up in communities they are researching. Moreover, as such a researcher, I remain very active in the communities and with the people whose stories I utilize. The use of their counter narratives are not to "gain advantages" for the middle class, but a way to gain agency, attention, and support for those not seen and heard as the majority/master/norm.

A final criticism of Critical Race Theory's reliance on storytelling focuses on the issue of truth claims. Some critics argue that storytelling in scholarship often fails to provide social reality with the concreteness that "provides a needed antidote to the partial visions furnished by abstract, generalizing social sciences" (Posner, 200, p. 380). Rather, critics believe that storytelling fosters a singular perspective and causes empathy that clouds the perspective of one to make sound judgment (Duncan, 2005). Critics' ongoing argument is that critical race theorists have yet to illustrate how perspectives of color are different from traditional scholarship. This is why my work and the work of others that engages counter narratives to focus on the uniqueness of perspectives of color are vital.

Stringent numbers gathered from survey data will never fully illustrate the lived experience of an individual, specifically a individual's of color. It is assumed that experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students are similar to the predominantly white

populations on campus because everyone is a college student. However, this privileged perspective is very homogeneous and continues to perpetuate the lie that all students have access to equal education in college. In the excerpt below, one of my participants explains the additional challenges of being a first generation college student:

> *I feel like it's more difficult to establish yourself as a professional when no one else has done it in your family or within like your circle, just because you don't know people, you don't know where to look for a job or like even how to apply to colleges. That's the most difficult part…knowing that your all alone in this and that you have to make it all on your own without anyone's help. I think that's the most difficult part.*

As a college senior preparing to graduate, my participant's experience is not that of belonging. My participant shared that she feels alone in her academic endeavors, not simply because she is the first in her family to go to college, but because she feels that most staff and administrators do not care whether or not she completes her degree. Her experience of lack of support in college would be erased amidst the numerical data collected on the successful rates of graduating seniors. Quantitative inquiry will not capture this woman's and other Mexican American women's struggle to maintain academically, while also working to serve as a support for their families. Quantitative data will not highlight emotional and mental stress that my participants experience that ultimately effects their experience, performance, and persistence in college. Quantitative data will not include these women's truths. Narratives allow for an understanding and inquiry into social reality that deliberately focuses on worldly viewpoints from subjugated groups (Matsuda, 1996).

Critics ask how one can know what version of a story is better or more accurate than other versions, however, society and America at large, have been choosing to privilege one, and

only one, version of history and stories. The stories of white people, white students, and white issues are used as the norm and often the standard for which non-whites must conform. Those in power are those who get to write history (Duncan, 2005). Since its independence, which is built on the backs of slaves and indigenous individuals who were already inhabitants of "America", The United States has chosen to deem "white as right" and anything else as abnormal. An example of how white versions of history are privileged can be seen in numerous examples, once of which is the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago. American History books report this event to be one of triumph over Mexico as the treaty that brought an official end to the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) (www.archives.gov). The treaty called for Mexico to give up almost half of its territory, which included modern-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and parts of Colorado, Nevada, and Utah. In return, the U.S. paid $15 million in compensation for war-related damage to Mexican land. However, this history is incomplete and aligns itself with white America. The other truth to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago is one of lies and deceit.
The treaty called for the protection of the property and civil rights of Mexican nationals who would now be living on U.S. soil. The United States agreed to police its side of the border; and both countries agreed to compulsory arbitration of future disputes. However, when the United States Senate ratified the treaty, it erased Article 10, which guaranteed the protection of Mexican land grants. Article 9, which dealt with citizenship rights, was also weakened. This in turn created an anti-Mexican atmosphere that spurred the violation of their civil rights. The effects of the outcome of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago are still felt today by Mexicans in The United States, where all Mexicans are seen as illegal, regardless of citizenship.

Although criticisms of storytelling and Critical Race Theory are numerous, they cannot withstand the reality that counter narratives transform scholarship and society. Subjugated

groups, particularly Mexican Americans, can no longer be ignored in academic accounts. Policy makers, universities, and educators, must understand the additional stressors and inequities experienced by this population and coordinate efforts to construct ways to fully include these women and their experiences in the academy instead of merely utilizing their enrollment in "diversity". This research and the use of counter narratives will provide evidence for equal support and opportunities for Mexican American women as they journey through college.

"It Can't Just Be Me": Topic Selection and Question Construction

The first time I questioned whether I was the only one experiencing stress in higher education was the first time I *was* the only non-white student in my class. Warned in my master's program interview that I would be the only student of color in the cohort, should I be accepted, I remember calmly stating that being the "only one" would not phase me because I was focused on my goal of attending and obtaining a Master's degree. However, I had no concept of what it was like to be the "only one," but I would soon understand. Born and raised in Texas, I was surrounded by people who looked like me and sounded like me. No one questioned my brown skin or my "accent", because everyone was brown and spoke "normal". From kindergarten through high school, I was part of the ethnic majority in my classrooms and I cannot recall having to explain a Mexican cultural holiday, or my lunch that consisted of tacos, to anyone. If an individual spoke Spanish and had brown skin, it was assumed they were Mexican.
When speaking to my students and sharing my educational journey, I often joke that before I left Texas to pursue my undergraduate education, I did not know that other Latinos existed because Texas felt like its own country. Although the term "culture shock" is often associated with a negative experience, I had an invigorating and world opening culture shock when I moved to

Miami, Florida for my Bachelor's degree. My undergraduate experience was filled with overwhelming on campus support, student leadership activities, and life changing experiences. These positives made the challenges of being away from home, enduring the loss of my father, and working to help pay for my college tuition while attending classes less stressful. I rarely, if ever, felt alone.

Although my undergraduate institution did not feel like a predominately white institution due to my various support networks and mentors across campus, it can still be classified as such due to student body. I can still recall encountering stressors while pursuing my Bachelor's degree, but the only difference was that I felt supported on campus and felt like I belonged. During my undergraduate education, my father and uncle passed away, financial family issues arose, and family criticisms of me being away from home instead of taking care of my mother in Texas found their way to me thousands of miles away. Through all of this, I can recall always feeling supported by my campus community.

However this was not the case during my Master's education. While the stress of being the only students of color in my academic program was not felt until I entered graduate school, it was still very real, very debilitating, and very institutionalized. Not only was I seen as abnormal in the academy for being a Mexican, brown, non-white student, but I was also seen as abnormal by certain individuals in my community in Texas because I left home, was not married, did not have any children, and did not have a "real" job. Called out as the "abnormal" in a classroom discussion during a graduate class because I was not white ignited a sense of urgency and critical inquiry about other women of color who were experiencing this same injustice.

The choice to focus my research on Mexican American women first generation college students who are currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree is a result of my personal insight into

the alienation and isolation that can happen to Mexican American women at some institutions, while not at others. My experience at my undergraduate institution was drastically different from that at my master's institution. The key factors in the difference of experiences were support and belonging. At my undergraduate institution, I felt like a core group of administrators and faculty, student support offices, and all of my peers wanted me to succeed in obtaining my bachelor's degree. While pursuing my bachelor's degree, although I did not know every professional staff member on campus, the core group of administrators and faculty that I did know also *knew* me. These individuals knew about my family back in Texas, about my academic successes and challenges, extracurricular activities on campus, and would even lecture me about life lessons. My undergraduate community felt like *family*. The reason this community felt like family and knew me is because they asked me about me and really cared about my answer.

Starkly different, my experience while pursuing my master's degree was not filled with support, but rather with blatant messages stating that I did not belong on campus or, for that matter, in graduate studies. Although there were a few administrators and faculty on campus that assisted me in pushing through to the end of my master's program, my graduate institution was not my community. I felt like a visitor and was reminded that I was a visitor by comments stating that I did not look like I was from "around here". My physical features confused most individuals I encountered on campus and when they couldn't classify me as either a Latino, Asian, Black or of mixed race, they played up my exoticism. The mentality I adopted as a survival mechanism was that of "me versus them". I was not going to let the university and its community beat me out of a degree! They simply assumed that my presence was a rare "abnormal" occurrence that was just passing through. Ahmed (2012) states, "Bodies stick out

when they are out of place" (p. 41). I stuck out from the white space on campus and my very being reiterated the whiteness of this space.

Qualitative research functions to provide greater understanding and increased knowledge about a particular narrative. It is never about quantity, but the quality of insights of experiences (Patton, 2002). This inquiry is providing insight and space for my participants to tell their stories, reflect on their experiences, and learn about themselves, and in the process, as the researcher and member of this population, I am learning about myself. As a woman, Mexican American, daughter, activist, and educator, the words, experiences, and stories shared by my participants resonate within me. Sharing similar identities with my participants, and having an invested interest in their well-being, "my role continuously shifted from asking questions to answering them, from facilitator to participant, and from listener to interpreter" (Bettez, 2007, p. 18). This research, however, impacts more than just me or my participants. On the much larger scale, parents, educators, school districts, academics, universities, and all who interact with the education of students of color, particularly Mexican American women, must acknowledge and understand the challenging academic experiences of these women, because not only do they call attention to unexplored narratives, they continue to critique very real issues with unequal support and academic access in higher education. Moreover, the stories of these women name institutional racism, sexism, classism, etc, within the university (Ahmed, 2012). It is not enough to simply look at the increasing number of Mexican American women in higher education and assume that "things are getting better". This surface level interpretation merely continues to sweep the pieces of the cracked university system under the rug by not acknowledging that once these women enroll in a bachelor's degree program, they experience immediate stress at various levels of the institution and in society often causing these women to question their ability to

succeed. Initially, these women are welcomed as students to universities, however, they are accepted on the condition that "they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by 'being' diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 43). Many of these women often feel that they must assimilate to the dominant culture and deny a part of their identity to succeed. However, they are still perceived as an outsider in the academy due to their Mexican American identity.

As the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority population in the United States, the specific needs and issues of Mexican Americans must no longer fall on deaf ears. According to the United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 33.5 million Latinos of Mexican origin resided in the United States in 2011. Additionally, Mexicans are the largest population of Latino origin living in the United States and accounted for approximately two-thirds (64.6%) of the U.S. Latino population in 2011 (USCB, 2011). Currently, Mexican Americans have the lowest educational attainment levels of Latinos in the United States, with only 10% of individuals 25 and older obtaining a bachelor's degree. The need to understand the educational experiences of Mexican Americans is vital to societal growth, success, and leadership as this population is no longer and will continue to not be the numerical minority.

Research Design: The Study

When considering methods of inquiry for my research, I considered the methods in which my population, Mexican American women first generation college students had previously been studied as well as the purpose of my study. Mexican American women, with few exceptions, have been grouped into the larger group of Latinas and Latinos, and as a result, have become a number within a percentage of the growing Latino population in the United States. Silenced and

converted to a number, Mexican American women's stories have often become silenced simply by applying a quantity to their population, as if to say that this population is represented and present in society and education, so things are now "equal". Voices, life stories, and daily experiences of this population, by utilizing qualitative inquiry, can unearth new truths that were never meant to be learned and brought to light in society and challenge white heteronormative normalcies.

The main focus of my inquiry is to learn and understand the experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students? I focus on women who were currently pursuing Bachelor's degrees. The questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students at predominantly white institutions?
    - How does gender affect this experience?
2. In what ways do these experiences counter the experiences that are currently in literature?
    - In what ways do the misrepresentations of this population influence the ways in which Mexican American women first generation college students are supported in higher education?
3. How can universities better serve this population?

Prior to providing a plan of how I plan to answer these questions, I will provide initial background information on how participants were recruited and selected, introduction to the participants, and community to provide context in which this study takes place.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The relationships formed with my participants are very dear to me. In fact, I view them as the siblings I never had since I am an only child. However, I did take for granted how easy it was to create community and build trust with these women. Initially I never questioned it because the trust was organic and felt seamless. Challenged to reflect on *why* my participants opened up their lives to me, I realized that my actions and community work on campus afforded me their trust. Prior to the commencement of my research, I served as a facilitator for various leadership, identity development, and diversity workshops on campus. Additionally I also served as a teaching assistant for one of the campus' hallmark education courses focused on race and culture in society. When serving in any of these capacities, I focused on *serving* students and genuinely connecting with and listening to them. Whether an instant connection was made during our first meeting, or created over a semester of interactions in the classroom, I made sure that these women felt that they could rely on me as a support on campus, for both personal and academic needs. As a result, when reaching out to gather interested participants for my study, the response was overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the research topic. Their trust lied in their past experiences with me and my unwavering character, attitude, and interactions with them. Additionally, I believe that seeing me in campus spaces and programs deemed inclusive and "for students of color" showed my participants that I am genuinely committed to created supportive spaces on campus for them.

After receiving IRB approval in January 2013, I sent an email to seven students on who I previously worked with on campus who self identified as Mexican American women via casual conversations, academic assignments, or cultural campus programs. The email informed potential participants that I was a Mexican American doctoral student conducting research

focused on the experiences of Mexican American women, first-generation college students, currently pursuing their Bachelor's degree. Utilizing my familiarity with these students and my membership as an insider of Latin@ community, I chose to gather participants using purposive sampling/my mentorships that will be discussed in a later portion of my dissertation.

I was pleasantly surprised that all seven women promptly responded to my email and were willing and able to serve as a participant for my study. I asked all participants to send me the contact information of others if they thought of another woman who might be interested in participating and who met the criteria for the study. The final three participants were gathered from referrals (email and face to face) from the other participants.

Participant Overview

Ten self-identified Mexican American women participated in the study. Although participants did not specifically state that they utilized the term "Mexican American" to describe themselves, instead of Chicana or Latina, the women self-identified as such when they agreed to participate in the study. All participants also self-identified as first generation college students. Nine participants were from are major Mid-West city and one was from a suburb of the major Mid-West city. All participants also attended and graduated from public elementary and high schools. All participants had siblings and two participants had siblings with disabilities. Nine participants are from dual parent households and one participant is from a single parent household. All participants speak English and Spanish, have on/off campus jobs, and are involved in extracurricular activities on campus (i.e. sororities, cultural organizations, community service). Participants will be further introduced in Chapter Four.

Data Collection

Interviews

My research design included individual interviews, the first semi-structured, while the second served as a space to follow up on questions raised during the first interview. These interviews serve as my primary source of data. The first interview was initiated with guiding questions, but was ultimately structured around topics brought up by the participant. Working to increase validity and impact, my design included interviews from ten participants. Initially, I contacted eight students that I previously interacted with via campus programs and those who were previously enrolled in my class where I served as their teaching assistant. These women provided the contact information of other women they felt would be interested in participating in this project. The total number of participants at the completion of this project was ten.

First and second round data collection occured from February 2013 to February 2014. The current ten participants were asked to participate in the project in a face-to-face conversation where I explained and outlined the objectives of the research:

- Timeline of completion (February 2013 to February 2014)
- Participants must be between the ages of 19-25
- Currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree at a specific large 4-year public institution in the Mid-West
- Self identify as a Mexican American woman
- Self identify as the first in her family to attend college (first generation)
- Must be willing and able to participate in two one-hour interviews

After agreeing to participate in the study, a time to set up the first round interview was discussed. The interview site was chosen by the participants to ensure that they would feel the

most comfortable during their interview. The only request given was that the space chosen be semi-private and suitable for audio recording. Eight of the participants chose to utilize a small office in the Latina/Latino cultural center to conduct the first round of interviews. Two participants chose a local coffee shop to conduct the first round interview. Microsoft Word, via my personal laptop, was used to record the interviews.

During our first interview meeting time, prior to actually starting the interview, I answered any questions participants had and received consent (appendix 1). I initiated the interviews with asking how the participants were feeling so as to ensure that they still felt up to interviewing that day. All interviews lasted approximately one hour, with the shortest interview being 37 minutes and the longest being one hour and five minutes. The interviews were sent to a paid transcription service and were transcribed three to five days after recording. To ensure accuracy of the transcript, upon receiving it from the transcription service, I listened to the interview recording while reading along with the transcript, making corrections when necessary. Additionally, to ensure confidentiality of participants, audio files were titled with pseudonyms. After I received the transcriptions, I coded for themes emerging from interviews regarding participants' experiences while pursuing their bachelor's degrees. After coding, I reviewed the data to pinpoint what exact questions the data addressed. Once specific portions of interviews were identified as portions that would be utilized for specific themes, I asked specific participants to read over their transcripts to validate and approve its use. Although seen as a potential risk to not have the participants read their entire transcript, I took into consideration my participants' work, school, and extracurricular schedules and decided to have them read only the portions I utilized in the dissertation, so as to remain respectful of the limited amount of hours the participants had to accomplish personal daily tasks. Although the opportunity to read the

entire transcript was offered to each participant, all declined the offer. Additionally, three colleagues read through the transcripts to triangulate the data to ensure validity. Working with the preliminary data, four main themes emerged from the data: feeling alone, financial stress, choosing between identities, and the lack of college culture knowledge as a first generation college student. These themes were then analyzed for if and how they corresponded with the tenets of CRT specifically counter-storytelling and whiteness as property.

Due to my participants being involved in activities on campus, while still being students, and holding jobs, the second interview took the form of questions sent via email, to remain respectful of their hectic schedules. Additionally, three participants have graduated since the inception of my study and are no longer on campus and one is studying abroad. Participants had the option of answering questions via email (Appendix 2), in person, over the phone, or via video chat.

Observations

Secondary sources of data utilized for this study were observations and interactions with participants outside of interviewing. These interactions occurred in various locations such as their family's home and "hang out" spots on campus. Most often, these interactions and observations occurred on campus while seeing my participants on their way to class or at an event on campus. Often times, my participants would briefly tell me that they thought about something that our previous interview/interactions made them ponder. On other occasions, some women would share life celebrations, struggles, and inquire about my life. While some interactions and observations are short, they provide rich context and data.

Chapter 4

Findings: Ask and They Will Tell You

This is so much more than dissertation research. The participants are more than just data. My research and my participants are my heart and although I knew this all along, I pushed away and avoided sharing *me* in this research because I wanted this work to tell the stories of my participants because no one has ever asked them what their experiences are like. However, with some caring and direct nudging from my advisor and committee, I am reminded that I, me as researcher, play a vital role in this research because of the fact that I connect to this research not only with my identities, but with my connection and commitment to this population of women. Challenged with wanting to share the experiences and voices of my participants but wanting to protect their identities, I invite you to know my participants and myself as participant researcher via vignettes of experiences had with or around these women along with their words collected via interviews.

Welcome to Her World

"How Come No One Asks Them?!"

"How come no one asks them?! How come these women's voices don't matter in education?!" The emotionally charged and passionate voice of my Director of Research boomed through the teleconference speaker during my preliminary dissertation defense when restating how imperative and vital my research was to women of color, specifically my participants. Exchanging a wide eyed glance with my Advisor, non-verbally approving of and acknowledging that not asking Mexican American women first generation college students about their experiences is *not* acceptable.

The last interview question in the first round interview asks, "How do you feel?". Although the list of first-round interview questions are used to get the conversation going if necessary, this last question is strategically asked. The majority of the women's answers stated that they felt reflective and that they have never really had the chance to think about their experiences in college. A smaller group of my participants shared that they felt "sad" because they never realized how much they have had to overcome to be where they are today. All participants mentioned that no one had ever asked them about how they felt in their college experience at some point of the interview.

When asked what it was like to reflect on her undergraduate experience, Aurora states:

> "Its amazing to see how far I have come. All of this was a simple dream long ago, it has become a life-time goal (becoming a role-model for women like me). It was hard at times to think back of the struggles I went through because some of those feelings come back".

What "struggles" was Aurora referring to? How could these struggles be supported if universities never asked, listened, or cared about Aurora's experience?

Aurora

Beef torta…maybe it was pork. Even though I don't eat pork regularly, I couldn't be rude and turn down the food her mother made because it would be rude and I'd be deemed a huerca. Her mother floated around the kitchen preparing the meal for us while myself, Aurora, her two sister, and her father sat at the granite counter watching and snacking on the large bowl of grapes and strawberries that were set out. I offered to help, but the mother wasn't having it. Aurora is the spitting image of both her parents…her perfectly manicured thick eyebrows from her father, her laugh and smile from her mother, but with

her own sassy attitude. Her youngest sister exchanged hugs with her father while waiting for the food and Aurora's middle sister told jokes and text on her phone. Aurora gave me a quick tour of the house while her mom finished prepping the food. *The house is gorgeous…everything has a spot and everything is in its place. "What do your parents do?!", I asked. "My parents clean houses. They cleaned houses for along time when they first got to the U.S. and then made enough money to start their own housekeeping business." A mom's voice echoes up the stairs, "Aurora, esta listo!" We both hurry back to the kitchen to eat with the rest of the family. I'm a stranger to the rest of the family but they don't seem to care. The love is real, the food is real, the laughs are real, and their welcome to me is genuine.*

Much of the Latina/o education focused literature often portray Latina/o students from a deficit model and master narrative that positions itself as a seemingly objective standpoint, but does not include the actual voice of Latinas. These students' lack of educational success is portrayed, from the master narrative[8], as academic and personal inability and the blame ultimately is placed on culture. Lauro Cavazos, United States Secretary of Education, exemplified how the master narrative can also be utilized by people of color, which contributes to the normative perception of racism in society. When discussing Latino dropout rates, Cavazos stated that Latino parents are to blame because "Hispanics have always valued education . . . but somewhere along the line we've lost that. I really believe that, today, there is not that emphasis" (Snider, 1990, p. 1). This common misconception is often utilized to place the blame of low

[8] A *master narrative*, as defined by Solórzano and Yosso (p. 28), is a story generated by whites that generalizes racial privilege and makes white privilege "natural". *Journal of Qualitative Inquiry* (2002), *8 (1)*, p. 22-44.

graduation rates of Latinas on their families by specifically highlighting assumed gender roles that value and expect women to stay at and care for the household. This narrative is a *LIE* for my participants and although all ten women offered counter narratives about the actual support their families provide, I will share a few to counter:

- "They're the reason why I have the goals I have. I know my dad's always been very supportive of my career choice, because I know a lot of my extended family was like, 'You're too smart to be a teacher. Don't just be a teacher, do something more.' My dad's always been supportive and he's always told me, "If you want to be a teacher, be a teacher. If that's what you want, do it. I'm going to support you." He's been really supportive these three years. He knows what I want to get out of life and he knows that no matter … I know, no matter what I do, he's going to have my back. It helps me branch out more, want to achieve more." (Haley, 2013)

- "My grandmother was the one who was really adamant about having all her children, especially her daughters get an education…my abuela always told us to go to school, get an education. My dad always used to say like, 'This is the only insurance I can give you if I'm not rich. This is the only thing I can give you…if you want to go to college I will support you and help you if you don't get a job.' My mom was always pushy like, 'No, you will go to college, you will go to school.' Yes, so I see them as a support network because they all help me in their own way. Even down in Mexico they are like … they're really happy, really proud that I'm at school." (Milagros, 2013)

- "My parents are really supportive, and even after we've argued so many times about what we are both, my brother and I, doing in school. Yeah, I think if I wanted to move to New York after graduation for any reason, my mom would be a little upset, but she wouldn't hold me back. My parents never hold us back from doing anything. If we need help financially or emotionally or whatever, they're there, so, yeah I feel they're there supporting me." (Estelle, 2013)

Estelle

Something about love…something deep about love. That's the flow she was on when I first experienced her presence. She was funky, fierce, giving me a mix between Boy George and a Mexican Madonna, and for this, I deemed her a fellow fashionista. Something about love…she was spittin' spoken word through lips dressed in plum lipstick…something about deep love, deep sad love. Her long black hair matched her "all black everything" outfit. She was ahead of the crowd, more in tune with this poetic art form and emotional expression than the audience, and she could feel that she was alone up on stage. Her nerves lessened as she breathed and tuned out the audience by closing her eyes. Love…young love…hard love…her voice trembled a bit, but she kept on, with the spotlight beaming on her. Something about love…an original love…an original piece she wrote herself was deep, real, true, and personal. The way she dressed, the way she acted, the way she spoke, and her being stood out above the crowd and I knew she was a warrior of her life.

As this population of women is rarely asked about their experiences, the majoritarian narrative that places blame of lack of support on families may in fact be false for many Mexican American women first generation college students outside of my study. This master narrative in current

literature not only miseducates and misleads the academy, educators, and individuals who do not identify as Mexican American, it also misconstrues the reality of the Mexican American woman first generation college student experience to women who identify as such. The current cannon does not speak to the specific experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students' experiences and creates a false perspective that this population too begins to think that their experiences are the same as majority students on campuses. Asking the final question of "How do you feel" at the end of the first interview with Jessica, she shared:

> Emotionally I feel like it's bringing out…like I can cry. But I never thought about my experience just because it's something that I thought was regular and normal…that everyone went through in college, but seeing the fact that it does impact the hardships of my education just by being first generation, it does make me feel emotional. It's tough.

Jessica perceived her struggles in college as "normal" and until participating in my study, thought that every student pursuing their bachelor's degree faced the same challenges she encountered. It was not until she was given the space to reflect and asked how she felt, that she understood her college experiences in relation to her identities of being Mexican American and a first generation college student.

Jessica

> *"I'd hug you but that would be awkward because you just have a towel on." Excitedly saying hi to Jessica in the women's locker room in the school gym, I realized that yeah…I was dripping wet in my towel and had just gotten out of the shower, so that would be kinda weird. Her laugh is big could light up an entire stadium full of darkness. It's one of those smiles and laughs that reminds you of childhood, of pure happiness, and sunny*

days. Meeting during a class, I was unsure of how to read her since the course only me together a few times a semester. However through a summer program, I was able to get to know Jessica, the bright, bold, "I'm gonna say what I feel and think", mommy's girl. I can relate to a "mommy's girl" because I am one. "My mom is my best friend. She tells me about everything…even when she's stressin' out about money…which stresses me out, but yeah…" Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar…just two of the concerts that Jessica and her mom went to this summer. Instagram pictures of the two of them at the concerts constantly scrolled down my timeline. "My mom had me when she was young, so we are closer in age than others…she's my best friend".

Putting on my shoes, Jessica returned and sat next to me…"I didn't get that job I applied for…that sucks", she shares. Reviewing the cover letter she submitted for the job, I was slightly relieved that she did not get the position because she was overqualified and the organization had a negative record of not doing what it promised for its employees or the populations it serves. "My mom says that something else will come along and that everything happens for a reason", Jessica says as she ties up her long black wavy hair into a bun on top of her head. I nod as Jessica continues to fill me in on her life. I hadn't seen her in a few months, but we manage to keep up with each other's lives on Instagram and Facebook. I echoed her mother's sentiment and replied, "I agree…one door has to close so that another one can open. You got this! Let me know if I can help you prep another application, OK?!"

Committed to creating more spaces for reflection such as the one my final question during my initial interview provided, I inquired about what it was like to be a participant in my dissertation study:

> I found that I don't stop to really give myself credit and be proud of what I have accomplished. Being in a competitive environment such as this campus really makes you experience a great deal of stress. I find myself constantly comparing myself and my successes with that of my fellow colleagues and in turn become my own worst critic. Taking the time to actually sit down and just run through all the years and everything that happened within them really helps me to center myself again and feel whole, feel that although I may not always feel it, I am moving forward (Sandra).

Emotionally Obligated

> *Looking down at the pen, the sterile walls around me did not lend any comfort to my internal distress. Family around me sat scattered in uniformed seats and waited for the slightest break in my composure to run over to my side. My plane had touched down not more than one hour before this very moment and already, the last bit of youth, of dependency I was grasping onto was wrongfully being pried from my hands. Pretending to read everything on the paper, the only words that popped out and delivered sharp jabs to my face were "in the event"…"resuscitation"…"serious complications"…"death". Wanting to switch places, run away, be angry at everyone, and cry, I took a deep breath, and robotically moved my hand across the line. Underneath the line were three words, "Power of Attorney". I signed my name to a piece of paper that warned me my mother could die and I'd have to be ok with it. As the doctor walked back into the operating*

room, I held my head high, smiled, walked to the family gathered in the waiting room and assured them that she would be fine...while I was dying inside.

Waiting for two hours to hear any sound that resembled the OR doors opening, I replayed the previous conversation I had with my mother while she was being prepped for surgery. It had been five months since I'd last seen her face to face and we had 30 minutes to catch up before her surgery. Knowing that she was nervous, I joked with her and made her laugh and helped her remain confident that everything would be ok. Glancing up from the floor, in slow motion, I remember the doctor waving all other family members off and pulling a chair up in front of me. Believing that she was fine was no longer an option…the doctor's face seemed pensive and concerned. Mom was alive, but on a respirator. There were major complications and she would be in a comatose state for the next couple of days in intensive care until they could evaluate her. Respirator? Comatose? The voice that I heard daily, that I often took for granted, that sometimes frustrated me, was silenced by a plastic tube providing life. I longed. I hated. I felt alone.

Opening the curtain of my mom's intensive care room, I became numb. As an only child, I had no one to share my anguish with. It seemed like there were 10 tubes woven in and out of my mother's seemingly lifeless body and the only sound to be heard were monitor beeps and the wheezy respirator…when all I wanted to hear was her voice. If I prayed I guess that would have been the right time, but I don't believe in anything…especially now, seeing my mother lying in an intensive care bed, looking like

an exact replica of my grandmother who had passed away in the exact same hospital one month before.

Placed in the role of daughter care-giver for my mother, by society, my culture, and myself, I created barriers and dams for my emotions so that I could focus on supporting my mother and my friends, who are like family. My notions of strength equating to unexpressed emotions were placed upon myself by myself, but were not placed upon others. My close family and friends would consider me compassionate because I place myself in the maternal care-giver role when they need to release feelings. I can attest to just recently starting to engage my feelings (at the age of 31) and express how I feel, but that was because I could no longer hold onto my emotional burdens. In my sister circle, made up of women of color friends who have become family, we often share stories of how similarly, we have "sucked up" emotions to be seen as the source of strength for others in our families. Unfortunately, this similarity could be seen in the stories of my participants, which is astonishing and worrisome. Where have we learned these notions of "strength" that is ultimately detrimental to us?

What you will not hear from my participants is that they are emotionally drained. They will nonchalantly speak of a chronically ill family member or a special needs sibling and skim over the support role they play in the matter, not because they do not care, but because they deem their support role as a something that "just is". JR, who has a sibling with autism, after our initial interview, send me a follow up email after further reflecting about our discussion:

> "I kinda wanted to include with my interview that while I don't have any financial obligations to my family in Chicago I do have emotional obligations. What I mean with that is that I am included in the problems of the whole family and I am expected to be there to fix the problems."

The "problems" at the time of her email dealt with a teacher who was being abusive to her little brother. She was involved with the legal process and focused on making sure her little brother was placed in a more supportive learning environment. When we initially spoke about the condition of her brother, JR shared that her little brother and her have a special bond. He listens to her and cooperates with her the best and she felt a strong sense of responsibility over his wellbeing.

Angela

La Virgen de Guadalupe hung from her neck…well a gold medallion of La Virgen hung on her neck. Truth be told, her bling caught my attention before she caught my attention. We met through a campus program and she kept it real with the other students in the program and called them on their BS when they least expected it…and I loved that about her. J is soft spoken and a great listener, so she can be perceived as quiet. But when her peers began making assumptions about the city she was from and the low socioeconomic status of certain groups of people, she jumped…her sweet candy-like voice stayed sweet like candy level, but if you paid attention to the words, you'd feel some sort of way, cuz she just schooled you.

Schedules were checked about two times and breakfast was rescheduled about three times because she is so busy. Student, jobs, and family…these commitments fill J's schedule. I'm not even a morning person, but we met at eight o'clock AM for pancakes because that was her free time before work. "I'm use to waking up early…I get to the bus stop early, because if I miss the bus, then I'm late for work and then that's 15 minutes that I don't get paid for …and every little bit counts", she says. J pays her own way through

school: Apartment, food, phone, bus/train tickets home. Her parents won't allow her to send money home, but when she does go home, she finds ways to sneak money to her family, like treating her mom to a pedicure or taking her dad out to eat.

Attending college away from home creates similar yet nuanced issues within the lives of my participants. Similar to Angela, other participants try to uphold a commitment to being emotionally strong and present for their families, even while away at school.

Elizabeth:

Stressssssss. That's the vibe that was coming off of her. "I'm fine", she says, as she paces in and out of the office. "I'm fine", she says, as she sits down next to me and another one of her mentors. "I'm fine", she says, as she begins to tell us about why she had to make an unplanned trip home on the weekend. Her foot nervously up and down and the anger begins to pour out. Listening attentively, our eyes connect and her wall of defense slowly begins to crack. Her eyes begin to tear up and I close the office door. "I'm sorry" she murmured as she wiped the corners of her eyes hoping that the tears don't pour over her eyelids. Wishing I could take this burden from her, I reply, "Please don't apologize for crying. You know that you can cry…I understand you want to be strong and you are still strong, even when you cry…stronger in fact." She squeezes a broken smile out and releases a bit. This space…she never allows herself this space to breathe and release. She tries to be strong for her family back home but this slowly eats away at her. Her super organized, always busy, sticky note reminder filled calendar, aimed at constant perfection practices don't fool me. I use to be the same way…shit, still am at times.

For Dee, the need to hurry up and get over her emotions was an unspoken expectation because although she was away from home, she felt she needed to be resilient for her family back home. Sitting with her, in the presence of another Mexican American first generation woman, she reluctantly allowed herself to cry while she shared her experience with us. This community space that was created among the three of us allowed Dee to feel safe, to feel comfortable, and to ultimately *feel*.

Mexican American girls experience gender role expectations from society *and* cultural expectations. According to Anzaldúa (1987), "Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (p. 17). Though unspoken, cultural expectations and socialized gender roles affect the emotional identity development of girls of color. As a result of socialization, constricted identity development, and lack of support for the emotional self, Mexican American women often self impose emotional and physical stress to react and rectify familial issues when they arise, as this is engrained in our learning process.

Haley

The air smells like freshly fried and warm corn tortilla chips…"How do we learn this?" Sitting across from her, as she sipped her jumbo frozen margarita (with salt), I asked her how do we come to feel like we must be strong for our families who are struggling with something and why does our strength mean "no crying". Tying back her long black and dark brown highlighted curly hair into a bun, she says, "my uncle died a few months ago and my dad took it really hard. I picked up the phone and he just started crying. It was so hard to hear him cry, but I just told him that I would be home to help with the funeral and that I was going to be there for him. As soon as I hung up the phone, I cried so hard. I

couldn't let him hear me cry because I needed to be strong for him." During finals, Haley went home to be with her father during the funeral…"I was so stressed out. I needed to study, but I needed to be there for my dad."

Referencing Bartky (1990), Hopkins, McKie, Watson, & Hughes (2004) state that the "emotion work associated with femininity is disempowering as far as those providing emotional service must suppress their own feelings and emotions to achieve an outward display that offers comfort and support while addressing the emotional needs of others" (p. 123). The vignettes shared in this section illustrate "being powerful at the point of care but disempowered in the intersection of the reflective politics of gender…" (p. 123). Audre Lorde (1984) when discussing women's use of the erotic as power, suggests

> "we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves" (p. 54).

Disregarding agency as independent strong individuals regardless of emotion, "women's bodies frequently serve as the terrain on which progress is measured" (Volpp, 2000, p. 108).

Choosing Between Identities

> ***In the end…[she must choose between the two worlds: if [she] intends to succeed as a student, [she] must, literally and figuratively, separate [herself] from [her] family…***
> (Rodriguez, 1975, p. 17)

Identity plays a large role in the experiences of Mexican American women college students. Regardless of the terms she uses to identify herself, (Latina, Chicana, or another term) she will always be read as "other" and non-white by society, and in turn, the "Ivory Tower".[9] Bold and blunt, this claim embodies the experiences rarely explored of Mexican American women first generation college students. Multilayered due to various intersecting identities, these women feel as if they must over perform certain identities to feel included in certain cultures and then underperform other identities to be included in other cultures.

In the movie *Selena* (Nava, 1997), Edward James Olmos, playing the father of the Tejano star states, "We gotta prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are, and we gotta prove to the Americans how American we are, we gotta be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time. It's exhausting! Damn! Nobody knows how tough it is to be a Mexican American!" Working to prove that they are indeed Mexican *and* American, the first generation women of this study discuss how this cumbersome battle between their two worlds and intersecting identities strains their academic experience:

> I always have my Mexican side and I have my American side. For me, it's always been like when should I come out with my Mexican side? When should I come out as Mexican? When should I be American? So with my cousins…I could be both, I'm Mexican-American, I speak Spanglish. We have that dual identity going on, but then when I'm with the whole family, I'm Mexican. Speak all Spanish. I have the identity and I embrace it like I've always embraced it. But then I know, once I'm here [on campus], you have to act a little more American, like I can't let my Mexican side come up too much. Especially my classes, I don't feel that's okay

[9] "Ivory Tower" is another term for a university and speaks to the White hegemonic structures that function within a university setting.

to just come up all full Mexican, I have to tone me down and heighten up the American side of me just so I won't feel like an outcast in classes, so I always have that dual identity (Haley, 2014).

Haley not only works to negotiate her identity of Mexican American with her family, but also in class, where she admits to silencing part of her by toning down her Mexican side so she can increase her chances of belonging. Further sharing her experiences of frustration in class settings where she feels the need to silence herself because she thinks her words will be too harsh for her assuming classmates, Haley states, "There's certain places I know I can be Mexican-American, certain places I know I have to be Mexican, and certain places I know I have to be American", illustrating that she does not feel like she can be her entire self on campus.

Glass of water, one whole egg (still in the shell), and then she begins: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth...". Passing the egg over my body, starting at the top of my head, over my forehead, up and down each of my limbs and then finishing by making the Sign of the Cross on my forehead with the egg. She does this three times while repeating the Apostle's Creed prayer. Once done, she cracks the egg into the glass of water and then places the glass under my bed for the night. This ritual was done anytime I had a fever or a headache that my mom believed to be the sign of someone giving me the "Mal Ojo". "Mal Ojo" is a Mexican American cultural practice surrounding the belief that someone looked at you with jealousy or bad thoughts towards you and had a strong enough gaze that they passed this negativity onto you, resulting in a headache. I also grew up with my mom feeling the need to lay hands on a baby's head when she told the parents how cute the baby was. If not, she may give the baby "Mal Ojo"

by mistake. "Don't tell people, especially at school, that we do this", she instructed. So while my mother outwardly displayed this practice of laying hands on cute babies and touching random things she admired so she won't give them bad vibes, she did not want me to share with others that she swiped an egg over me when I had a headache. All I knew was that this practice seemed to help relieve my headache and that every woman in my family practiced the "Mal Ojo" remedy. I wondered why I couldn't say anything to anyone even though it seemed like everyone in my family knew about it. My mom told me that people would think that we were witches or crazy...and that scared me. It was in this moment that I began hiding specific Mexican American cultural practices, especially if I wasn't sure if others would judge me. From this I learned that I needed to not be my whole self in certain areas and around certain people, because I might be judged.

W.E.B. Dubois (1903), in *The Soul of Black Folks*, coined, developed, and problematized the theory of *Double Consciousness* which is awareness of living as two entities, a "two-ness" of being an American and African American. Dubois (1903) states:

> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (p. 3).

Although specifically discussing African Americans, Dubois' Double Consciousness lends itself to the experience of my participants and I feeling pressured to choose between identities and *knowing,* out of learned instinct, when to shift in order to thrive in higher education.

Mi Tierra/Sin Tierra

"CC would be abnormal." Pointing at me while she stood at the front of the class, the professor kept on with her lecture about "abnormalities" in higher education. She used me as an example of being abnormal in my master's program because I was a Mexican American in a master's program. In fact, I was the only student of color in my cohort. Looking around the room hoping to see faces of disapproval about the professor's comment, I instead saw heads nodding in a "oh, yes we understand" fashion. The class kept on and I checked out. I did not participate in class discussion for the rest of the period and no longer felt supported by anyone in the room. Why weren't other people singled out for their height, hair, or even hometown? I am a student, a woman, and an American, like the majority of my peers that filled the classroom that day, but all they saw was my Mexican-ness not belonging.

I will always remember that day in class. My master's program taught me a lot about theory, but more importantly, it helped me find my voice, even though alone often times, it helped me understand how people saw me in the classroom. I was "different" and in a space that was not really meant for me.

When explaining that Mexican Americans live life on a border experience, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "Ni de aqui, ni de alla" meaning "Neither from here, nor from there." Not simply referring to being of Mexican ancestry while American born, Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory highlights the need for a physical and emotional connection to a space in order to thrive and feel welcome. This connection is often associated with home and artifacts such as food, music, familiarity of settings. This connection with the land/space is non-existent for the

Mexican American women first generation college students in my study. Although seemingly simplistic, the very absence of a specific food common in the home neighborhood, la tierra, can impose a sense of discomfort, disconnect, and lack of belonging for these women while on campus.

> *I think she uses one roll of tape on every box she sends me. Fingers crossed that there's something to eat in here…and some money. Money is always nice. Crumbled up newspaper ads from the grocery store back home always makes me miss home. The ad is half in Spanish and the food sounds and looks so much better than the food in the grocery stores here. A blue lid from a Ziploc bin greets me first and once I get the eight strips of tape off the lid, I encounter heavenly Mexican bliss--Mexican sweet bread from my favorite bakery back home. Pan de juevos, maranitos, cuernos, Mexican wedding cookies, and pink cookies fill the bin. The smell is like no other and I can't seem to find this smell here where I live…or try to live. Next in the box are small bags of Flaming Hot Cheetos with lime. I know I can get these here, but they taste so much better coming from home. I swear they tone down the heat on the ones they sell here. Finally, at the bottom of the box is a card from mommy which is her signature thing. Her words are always simple and to the point, "I love you Mija", but they make me feel so good.*

Packages from home are always welcomed and wanted because they remind me of my mom, of home, and of a place where I belong. Having been accepted to their university as well as having attended for multiple years, my participants still do not feel as if they are recognized, noticed, or accepted on campus. Defined as a negative space, assumed to hold abnormal or unfit things and individuals, these women feel as if they are invisible:

"One way that the university can attempt to better support me as well as other women like me would be to acknowledge that we exist. We are a small community, but we are loud, we are impactful, we are leaders, and we make a difference. However, a lot goes unnoticed and I believe that it is mainly because the majority of the campus doesn't know we exist… I think that if the university would acknowledge more of the accomplishments from the Latino community, the campus would be more aware of the diversity here on campus and be proud of it." (Sandra, 2013)

Sandra:

"Dear CC, can you please read over my graduation speech?!…That's how her email started. I can hardly believe that Sandra is graduating already. It seems just like yesterday that she walked into my class, donning her sorority jacket and sat at the front the room. In her speech draft, her words seemed wise beyond her years. Sandra started by acknowledging that she was sold a false fairytale of college when she first entered that was suppose to be filled with all the "best" things. However, she stated that her road to completing her bachelor's degree was filled with many pitfalls that no one warned her about. She urged her fellow graduating classmates to remember and embrace the times when they stumbled along their path to graduation because the struggles are often great lessons. In a "track-change" note next to that sentence, all I could write was, "Dang…POWERFUL…so true". During her four years on campus, she had accomplished so much and, in my eyes, served as a leader in various capacities on campus. She took on an off campus job to be able to study abroad and also remained

focused on her academics, yet she remained her toughest critic. Towards the end of my data collection, she emailed me a response to a question I posed about being her toughest critic: "I don't stop to really give myself credit and be proud of what I have accomplished. Taking the time to actually sit down and just run through all the years and everything that happened within them really helps me to center myself again and feel whole, feel that although I may not always feel it, I am moving forward." Yes you are Sandra, and I'm so very proud of you.

Money on Her Mind

"…I remember last year I got to a point where I just fell into a corner and I can't breathe because I'm like, 'How am I going to get this much money?!' I'm like, 'I'm working and I have school and I don't have time to get another job.' Yes, that was a big stresser, money, which is ironic because I'm like I hate money but I need it. I'm like, 'It's really ironic that I hate money and I'm like I don't want to think about money but I have to constantly think about money.'" (Milagros, 2013)

Milagros, like most of my participants, when asked if there was anything that they stress over in their college career, speaks passionately about how money, or lack there of, burdens them. Not only did Milagros speak of being stressed, but she mentioned how this stress affected her physical well being by not being able to breathe due to being overwhelmed.

Milagros

Long curly wavy brown hair hangs down her back and is parted in the middle of her head. It is easy for her to fly under the radar of an environment because she is soft in her appearance, actions, and speech. Glasses, sneakers, jeans, and a tshirt are her usual

daily attire. The way she looks could fool you into thinking that she was meek and easily overseen, however, that is far from who she and I knew this from my initial interaction with her. Behind her glasses and soft-spoken voice, she spits rapid knowledge…knowledge about the inequities of "the system", knowledge about the unjust inequities of the current immigration practices of the United States, and of the inequalities for women in society. It never surprises me to see Milagros at a planning meeting for a large volunteer event, strike or petition, or women's rights program. It was no surprise that she was the recipient of an award celebrating her commitment to social justice on campus, and when I saw her and told her "congratulations", her cheeks turned red, she gave a humble smile, and said, "Thank you…I just do what I believe is right."

Milagros, like the other nine participants, all have on/off campus jobs, and some women hold more than one job. Their jobs are held out of necessity, not to earn "spending money". Coupled with being a student and attending classes as well as being involved in extracurricular campus activities, the women in my study work, which proves challenging when trying to complete coursework as well as earn a paycheck. Lack of financial resources may cause these students to obtain employment that limits an adequate amount of time for studying and educational activities, such as advising appointments (Fry, 2003). Working more hours to fill financial obligations (self or familial) coupled with classes has a negative effect on first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

As previously stated, my participants work out of necessity and all shared stories of feeling stressed when struggling to purchase items for school that were deemed part of "the basics":

> "Sometimes like economically I feel like I always worried or stressed out about like just how am I going to pay for materials, especially like my freshman year because I pretty much worked to buy all the stuff in my dorm. Sometimes it was pretty expensive like my laptop was expensive and I realized that but that's pretty much it. Just like the economic burden that it is on my mom…" (Jessica, 2013).

Although students in general may worry about paying for various items, the working class status of the participants' parents amplifies the stress that Mexican American women first generation college students face. Adding to the stress of having to pay for their own materials, wants, and needs, some of my participants additionally endure the stress of sometimes needing to send money home to assist the family. When sharing about stress that she believes is specifically linked to being part of a Mexican American family, Aurora states, "Sometimes [my family] is in a financial crisis or something at home, and it's like, I don't have that much money, but I'll help them with what I can."

The Counter Narrative

***"I had more pressure to fail than I had to succeed."* (Haley, 2014)**

The small pieces of truth shared in this chapter, when combined to create a collective, create a loud, real, and unapologetic counter narrative to the current academic and social thought currently held about Mexican American women and Mexican American families. The immediate families of my participants are not opposed and unsupportive of their daughter's academic success. Quite the opposite, families urge their first generation college student to attend and succeed in college because education is seen as a vehicle for upward mobility in society. Not feeling of the land and not belonging on campus and in classrooms as their full selves, Mexican American women first generation college students experience the stress of feeling the need to choose between or move between the two identities of Mexican and American. Coupled with financial stress, the experiences of this population is filled with more barriers than supports. The quote at the beginning of this section, from Haley, illustrates how Mexican American women first generation college students perceive the academy and society to be expecting and hoping that they fail in college, rather than succeed. How could universities have known this? No one ever asked these women for their truth, until now.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Recommendations, and Future Research

The scarcity of academic research literature existing on Mexican American women first generation college students provide context and strengthens the purpose and significance of developing literature on this specific population, which is the overall goal of my research. Given the underrepresentation of Latino students with higher education degrees and faculty, specifically Mexican American women in higher education, it was imperative to further unearth their experience, particularly variables contributing to the challenges and supports in their journey toward obtaining a bachelor's degree. Taking into consideration that most studies do not recognize the importance of examining the experiences of Mexican American women independent from those of Mexican American men, the intent of this study was to explore the unique experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students.

In this chapter I use collected data to respond to the three research questions that guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students at predominantly white institutions?
2. In what ways do these experiences counter the experiences that are currently in literature?
3. How can universities better serve this population?

Question number one and two are interconnected in focus and in data analysis and will be discussed in conjunction with one another. Following the discussion of Question one and two, I will provide recommendations as to how universities can better serve Mexican American women first generation college students (Question 3). Limitations of the study are discussed as well as avenues in which my study can continue to flourish and positively impact the population of study.

The Experience

In regards to the first question, four themes in experience emerge: 1) Feeling alone on campus, 2) financial stress for self and familial obligations, 3) immediate families provide substantial emotional support, and 4) navigating campus through muting certain identities to be understood/fit in.

Feeling alone on campus may be a common feeling for first year college students as they transition to find and build community. However, the women in this study did not feel alone for the first few months, weeks, or even the first year. Most felt alone throughout their entire college career when talking about their university in general. When support was found on campus by participants, it was found in pockets or with specific individuals. These specific individuals too identified as Mexican American women first generation college students and were either peers or Latino cultural center employees. Pockets of support were found within and among Latina Greek organizations, Latino/Latina focused registered student organizations, and one student specifically mentioned her college that focuses on working with underrepresented populations in society. The women's sense of aloneness can also stem from feeling as if no one understands their experiences on campus as Mexican American women first generation college students. When sharing how she felt alone while trying to learn the university system, Milagros stated:

> "To navigate this school for me, I felt like I was navigating blindly because I'm like I didn't know certain things that other people might have know because their parents went to college either about internships or all these other things that kind of scared me to a certain extent. Very much like … the professional world, I'm still very scared of it, so yes. I don't know it's like, yes, navigating with your eyes closed, which is really hard until you start with learning the game…"

Additionally, feeling as if the university does not know they exist, as specifically stated by a participant, can also compound this feeling of aloneness.

The second theme formed from the data is that of financial stress for the participants by needing to provide for self, and at times, their families. When asking about any burdens that they may have encountered during their undergraduate experience, all participants mentioned worrying about money. Financial need not only causes these women to worry about money, but because all participants have jobs to help with this need, their academic schedules undergo an additional level of time management and renegotiation of study time, work time, and extracurricular time. For example, some women spoke about needing to take off of work to meet with advisors or make class meetings that took away from their overall paycheck. While remaining dedicated to their academics, stress levels of the women who took off of work to fulfill student expectations increased during this time. For this study, stress "levels" are not quantified using a scientific scale, but rather by privileging the specific words and experiences of these individuals.

When sharing experiences of financial issues, whether personal or familial, the participants placed the responsibility of "fixing" the issue on themselves. Although not all participants contributed to the family income while in college, some women still did play a role in contributing to the family finances, either monthly or when their families asked for assistance. The women felt the need to take care of personal financial issues themselves as they did not want to burden families and because there was little their family was actually able to contribute. This amplified level of independence while still serving as a support for the family creates a stressor that, through the counter narratives of participants, proved to be the heaviest stressor while working to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Contrary to the unfortunate mainstream belief that Latino families, particularly Mexican families, function under a *machismo* family system where women are prescribed roles that focus on the household and education of women is not supported. While family remains of utmost importance in the Mexican culture, the misperception that Mexican American families are unsupportive of women's academic endeavors is false. During the first round of interviews, I asked the question, "Do you feel support in your educational endeavors and if so by who or by what?" All ten participants instantly mentioned their family, or a specific person in their family. In fact, not only did they mention family first as a support, they spoke at length about how their family or specific family member(s) constantly supported them. The term "support" was undefined during the interview and was done so purposefully so that participants could choose who and what they viewed as support. While all support initially discussed stemmed from family, the ways in which families showed support varied slightly. Haley discussed how her father was her greatest supporter and that his support was shown in daily text messages or phone calls encouraging her to study hard. Additionally, Haley shared that when she was "super stressed" with school, she knew she could call her father and he would remind her that she can "do it". Other women, like Milagros stated that she felt support from her family via her mother and grandmother's lectures to her about how education is key to success in the United States.

Recommendations

Rarely are support programs constructed by asking students what they need or how the university can best support them with specific challenges they may be facing. As a result, support programs or opportunities set in place to assist first generation college students are created by universities *assuming* that they know what this population needs. This occurrence can be compared to Freire's (1970) *banking concept* that refers to the way in which classroom

material is deposited into students as if they were receptacles, without dialogue, personal/real world application, or consideration of students' identities.

Throughout this study, my participants and their experiences remained the focus. Knowing that my dissertation framework required me to make recommendations as to how the experience of Mexican American women first generation college students could be enhanced, I made a conscious effort to not continue the cycle of assumption for this population. In the second round interview, I specifically asked the following question: "How can the university better support you as a Mexican American woman first generation college student?" While some students may not be able to speak to ways to change the larger institutional structures that affect their lived experiences as a college student, these women were able to speak to specific changes that would positively benefit them in their experience. Additionally, although the majority of the women did not name a deconstruction of a larger systematic practice within the academy, as the researcher utilizing Critical Race Theory to deconstruct and reconstruct these systematic structural practices, I will recommend larger changes adapted from the women's overall interviews. In the following paragraphs, I will provide specific recommendations and provide evidence as to why these recommendations are needed.

1. Continued examination of population

In Chapter four, I shared a quote from Sandra, who when asked how the university can better support Mexican American women first generation college students, shared: "One way that the university can attempt to better support me as well as other women like me would be to acknowledge that we exist." Studies such as this one will allow for this population to be better understood through learning of the unique and nuanced experiences of these women while also

making a concerted effort to better support this population. Remaining focused on this population would additionally increase the quality of programming, in and out of the classroom, by learning specific needs of this population, which would lend itself to wanting and needing to understand other non-majority student groups on campuses. Mexican American women first generation college students exist…now it is imperative to hear their voices and make their experiences just as important as those of White students.

3. Offer Programming that Caters to Various Student Schedule Factors

This study, although specific to the Midwestern region, is portable and applicable to all campuses deemed a predominantly White institution. While not all experiences of Mexican American women first generation college students are *exactly* the same, the heart of the significance lies in the acknowledgement and understanding that the experiences of this population are not that of the White population of students. Various factors, such as family obligations, dual identity consciousness between Mexican and American, and socioeconomic status have been show, via this study, to have a strong impact on the ways in which these women navigate and negotiate academics while pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Speaking back to the factor of socioeconomic status, all participants of this study held at least one on/off campus job to assist in paying for personal finances. Work schedules varied and while some women worked during the day, other women worked in the evenings. Regardless of the time of day, academic schedules as well as involvement in extracurricular meetings and activities was effected. When speaking about this issue, Chris states that because she and other students like her work, "having seminars or presentations during lunch hours or dinner time doesn't always allow students to attend". This is one of the reasons why it is NOT ENOUGH for

institutions to believe that simply by providing educational programming and academic office hours geared toward student success in college that they are supporting first generation populations. This is a saccharine attempt at best to fill an empty institutional "diversity" mission if the very populations who these programs are geared towards cannot attend. Support programming offering workshops such as time management, study skills, and wellness are mostly offered during one time, and although these programs may be beneficial for those who can attend, there is still a population of students who cannot attend because they must work to provide for themselves. Understanding that something as simple as increasing times and dates of workshops to accommodate multiple schedules will increase the academic support as well as show a greater commitment to populations such as Mexican American women first generation college students from higher education institutions. Below are two examples of the overwhelming schedules that many of the participants navigate:

- "My day starts off at 6 am. I get ready and catch the bus at 7:20 so I can be at my internship at 8am. At my internship, it is a constant steady pace, where there are times when I can't catch my breath. I take a working lunch so that I can leave at 4, so I can make it to my work to work at least 1.5 hours. After I get out of work at 6, I still have to run home, make a healthy dinner, and try to work out for 45 minutes. After that I sit down at my computer and try to do some homework. I am taking two classes on top of my internship that have homework due 2-3 times a week. At this point, I am beyond tired and ready for bed. My schedule makes it really hard for me to spend some time with my friends or to have some time for myself" (Angela, 2014).

- "A typical day would consist of morning classes from about 9:30am-2pm, then [campus activity[10]] practice in the afternoon, then work at night until about 10:30pm. Then I would get home and do homework and study so sometimes my day wouldn't end until about 2am because I also was working on getting all my paperwork and application material ready to apply to study abroad. Also, community service, risk management, and other different types of events that I would attend would filter into my weekly schedule as well" (Sandra, 2014).

Although many students are involved and active on campus, these women must navigate and negotiate their schedules to fit in academics as well as multiple jobs to accommodate personal and familial financial obligations while continuing to work towards their educational endeavors.

4. Implement/Restructure Required CRT Framed Class for All Students

Creating and continuing programming and events for first generation students may be a step in the right direction in regards to creating seamless transitional support as this population learns how to navigate the university. However, far to often is the population deemed "unique" to the rest of campus, like Mexican American women first generation college students, made to adapt their ways of knowing and acting so as to successfully adjust to campuses. For example, when speaking about becoming enthusiastically engaged in class participation, Haley states:

> "I think it's the fear of judgment. I think a lot of times in my classes I've always felt like I can't fulfill the stereotype. I can't be that, 'Oh, look at her, she became that sassy Latina. She fulfilled that.' I've always been scared of fulfilling stereotypes because I'm trying to work against them."

[10] Exact name of activity has been changed to ensure anonymity.

Haley felt as though she had to modify her tone and enthusiasm because her "sassiness" did not fit with the norm, and as a result, she self regulated her opinion so as to not be stereotyped.

This tactic of making the subordinate groups on campus adapt to the normative campus culture simply perpetuates the ways in which the academy and universities systematically work to streamline experiences of students into one general experience -- The White student experience. Without educating a university and campus, particularly the power yielding majority groups, about their privilege, they will deem themselves the "normal" groups that belong, while all others who fall outside of this norm are simply visitors on their campus.

Certain campuses, particularly the institution that the participants attend, have adopted the practice of creating mandatory courses for first year students, such as alcohol education, sexual assault safety, and diversity education. However, the diversity focused courses simply outline various differences among cultures while embracing the "we are all equal" perspective, without ever focusing on White privilege that the dominant population utilizes knowingly and unknowingly. Just as the alcohol education and sexual assault safety courses are geared towards prevention, implementing a course on White Privilege would begin the movement to prevent certain student groups from feeling as if their various identities on campus are unwelcomed or inappropriate for a predominantly white campus.

Limitations of Study

This study has been paramount in uncovering how issues of race, class and gender identities inform and shape the ways in which Mexican American women first generation college students experience college during their undergraduate careers. From this study, true lived

experiences of this population are deciphered that combat the majoritarian narrative that ultimately places the blame on the Mexican American culture, speaks against generalizations of this populations' experience in college, and provides specific ways universities can best support this specific population. However, this study is not without limitations.

First, with respect to the recruitment of participants, all study participants were involved on campus via cultural centers, Greek organizations, or extracurricular activities via a registered student organization. While all participants, at some points in their career, felt alone, they found community and support among the organizations they joined. Although their activity on campus was ultimately the way I met, engaged, and created a sense of genuine trust with them, the question of what counter narrative might have been missed from those Mexican American women first generation college students who were not already connected on campus via social groups arises. This population of women, who qualified for my study, may not have been so inclined to participate because they were not connected to individuals or campus units/organizations that would have alerted them to my participant recruitment. Perhaps this population's stories differ from those who are connected in some way to campus and may could have assisted this population as they are not connected on campus.

My sample included individuals between the ages of 19-23. This age range is often labeled the "traditional college student". Although this age range was chosen to capture Mexican American women first generation college students who were currently pursuing a bachelor's degree while steering clear of the additional paperwork of an IRB for individuals under 18 years of age, this age range does not take into consideration individuals deemed "non-traditional". The following questions apply regarding Mexican American women first generation, non-traditional college students: 1) How does their non-traditional status affect their identities of being a

Mexican American women first generation college student?, 2) What factors contribute to their success/struggles while pursuing a bachelor's degree, and 3) How does their non-traditional college student identity affect the way in which others see them and the ways in which they view themselves?

Although labeled "limitations", the issues discussed above serve as new avenues of research for myself and other scholars who are focused on increasing the voice and visibility of Mexican American women first generation college students. My inclusion of these limitations is also to acknowledge that not every Mexican American woman first generation college student's voice is represented in this study. Not discussing these future avenues of study would continue the silencing of this population that occurs far too often in academic literature. Let this section serve as a call to action.

Future Directions

This study has unearthed a number of lines of possible future research. One specific focus of research that I did not fully engage is that of the counter narrative of emotional obligation for Mexican American women first generation college students. Although this stress or expectation is identified as one of the main themes within the research data, there is much more to be learned about how the seemingly unspoken expectation of emotional resilience is formed, adopted, and how this affects the academic experience of Mexican American women students from k-12 and through college.

Additionally, I hope this work serves as a springboard to call attention to and name other structures and practices within the academy that inhibit Mexican American women first generation college students, and women of color in general, in engaging as full members of the

academy and campus culture. The inclusion of this populations' intersecting and fluid identities as part of the larger campus culture will assist in reevaluating and reinventing what it means to be a "college student" and what college students' varying needs are while obtaining a bachelor's degree.

Finally, I hope this work continues to give voice and visibility to Mexican American women, and women of color college students as a whole, in literature and in classrooms. It is far too easy to inadvertently negate ones worth and validity when one cannot read or see images of self in the literature or as knowledge creators, such as in having a Mexican American woman as a faculty member. This study must serve as a sounding board and catalyst piece for Mexican American girls and women who have, until now, felt alone in their struggle to learn, grow, and negotiate multiple identities while working to achieve academic goals. Although the reader will get to know participants via vignettes told in black and white text, it is my hope that these women's stories come to life for the reader and create a sense of community, a sisterhood if you will, for others who may be experiencing similar situations while in the academy.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Consent Form for College Student Participant

Purpose and Procedures: This study, under the direction of Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, will be conducted by Cecilia E. Suarez, Graduate Student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership. The study is intended to analyzes the current academic struggles of Mexican American women, first generation college students, between the ages of 18-25, who are currently pursuing a bachelor's degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to participate in two interviews, an interview today, and one scheduled for a later date, in this University of Illinois campus location or another private location of your choosing. Each interview will take about 1 hour. Additionally, with your permission, interviews will be audio recorded. You will have direct control over the audio recording device and can choose to start/stop the recording at your own discretion.

*I give permission for my interview to be audio recorded: ____YES ____NO

Voluntariness: Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, discontinue participation, or not answer any questions you don't wish to answer at any time without penalty or loss of the benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with this institution or the University of Illinois.

Risks and Benefits: You may experience some mild, temporary discomfort relating to the interview, as the questions asked concern your feelings, attitudes, and familial experience, but this research does not otherwise involve risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. You may also experience some concern about providing evaluative information about your current academic department. You will probably not receive any direct benefits from participating in this research. However, your participation may help researchers understand societal factors regarding educational success. Although present, risks are minimized through omission of personal identifying information, as stated in the Confidentiality section below.

Confidentiality: Only the responsible project investigator and the investigator will have access to consent forms that indicate your identity. There will be no personally identifying information such as name on the transcripts of the interview. In the event of publication of this research, no personally identifying information will be disclosed. You will be given the opportunity to read over the interview transcript and may choose to omit any information you wish.

Who to Contact with Questions: Questions about this research study should be directed to the responsible project investigator and person in charge, Ruth Nicole Brown, Assistant Professor of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership. She can be reached at (217) 333-0807 or email at rnbrown@illinois.edu. Cecilia Suarez can be contacted at (917) 297-0470 or by email at suarez7@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@uiuc.edu. You will receive a copy of this consent form.

I certify that I am 18 or older, have read this form, and volunteer to participate in this research study.

Please print name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

(Ms.)Education in the Borderlands of Academia: Gendered Experiences of Mexican American Women First Generation College Students

Guiding Interview Questions

1) How are you doing today? How are you feeling today?
2) Do you have any questions about your participation before we begin?
3) Please share with me your field of study at The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign.
4) What year of study are you currently in?
5) Where are you originally from?
6) Where are your parents originally from?
7) Tell me about your experience at The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign.
8) What are your goals upon completion of your degree at The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign?
9) Does your family play a part in your educational goals? If so, please explain how.
10) What does your family think about your educational goals?
11) Are you supported in your educational endeavors? If so, by who(m) or what?
12) Is there anything that causes a burden or stress on your educational aspirations?
13) Is there anything you would like to share that I may have not asked in my questions?
14) How do you feel?
15) Are there any questions I can answer regarding the study?

Appendix C

Second Round of Data Collection

Questions Emailed to Participants

1. Do you feel supported on campus (Non-familial support)? If so, by what/whom?
2. How can the university better support you as a Mexican American woman first generation college student?
3. What has this experience been like as a participant in my dissertation research?
4. What was it like to reflect on your undergraduate experience and your challenges/triumphs?

Appendix D

Participants

Name	From	Siblings	Household	Spanish & English	Involved on Campus
Angela	City	Middle*	Dual	✓	✓
Aurora	City	Middle	Dual	✓	✓
Estelle	City	Youngest	Dual	✓	✓
Haley	City	Oldest*	Dual	✓	✓
Nia	City	Oldest	Dual	✓	✓
Elizabeth	City	Oldest	Dual	✓	✓
Lilia	City	Oldest	Dual	✓	✓
Milagros	Suburban	Oldest	Dual	✓	✓
Sandra	City	Oldest	Dual	✓	✓
Veronica	City	Oldest	Single	✓	✓